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The novel is essentially an exploration of man's relationship to his environment, the emphasis being on his need to understand the land he lives on and his reactions to it.

The central character's sympathy for the land and his desire to learn from it form the basic conflicts of the work. The knowledge gained is not only of the sympathetic power between man and the wild but its potential danger as well in the form of animal aggression.

The major symbols of the story evolve from natural surroundings and myth, the horse and horseman being the primary motif, invested with an animal cunning and an animal savagery. The knife symbolism is more ambiguous, implying not only a link with the wilderness but also one with civilization. There is a sense of control over environment, and at the same time a latent violence and potential for killing.

The direction of the novel is toward a synthesis of the basic conflicts. Unity is brought about primarily through the horse or the horseman, fantasy being not only regenerated emotion, but a source of future strength in the images taken from the wilderness. The central character perceives the conflict in terms of a double life, one away from home and one conforming to his home. The pain such a split causes almost convinces him of its essential evil. He discovers, however, that he must return to the source of pain to learn all that pain can teach. Unity is an implication for the future, since to be truly effective, fantasy must move from a physical setting to within the central character, serving as a source of future dreams. The horse must never stop.

HAZARD
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by

Linda Sue Baugh
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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

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APPROVAL SHEET

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BAUGH

CHAPTER I

The boy took the long way home from school by cutting across Issac Harris's fallow corn field and resting in the county cemetery. He was thirteen but looked younger, knees against his chest, drawn up tightly to keep warm in the fall chill, not wondering, then, what had brought him there. He felt sad and strangely alone.

The cemetery around him was small, shaded by red oaks whose rust-brown leaves kept the sun from reaching the wild mustard and spear grass that surrounded the graves. Only five or six families had ever used the plot. His own family had a separate corner to themselves, at least it looked that way, because the others hadn't filled in the vacant ground between their graves and the Hazards.

The boy looked back across the open field to the highway that marked West Lake city limits. The town was growing, pushing outward until the housing projects, still raw and unfinished, seemed to spring up like wheat from the land itself. His father's lumber yard furnished most of the wood. The boy didn't like them: the houses were built close together on treeless acres that looked barren under the sun. He and a friend Ralph Hanson had used to raid the sites, pulling up survey stakes, but after awhile they had given up. The stakes were always there the next day.

The highway was lined with gas stations, five motels and a truckers diner. Set back from the road a small, salmon-pink house stood out from the flat land around it. Ralph Hanson and his mother lived there. His mother owned the truckers diner. Farther down the

highway a long road turned off, leading to downtown West Lake which wasn't much once you got there but was growing, too. It had only one main street, four dime stores, one movie house and eight churches. There was some talk that a shopping center was going in south of town.

His own house was a block from the highway, hidden by tall maples lining the road. It was the only two-story house on the block, and he liked being able to see beyond the neatly squared hedges and north school where he had gone for seven years, liking it less every year, beyond the railroad bridge and power lines to what was still open land. He didn't mind living where he did, but he wanted a sense of space to be there when he looked up from his desk or lay on his bed staring out the window.

The cold ground made the boy get up, and he walked idly past the headstones, tracing the elaborate scrolled patterns on the Hazard marble. Old symbols and words, often curving back on themselves, suggested that they had once spoken to the living of the past, but now they spoke to no one.

"Cynthia, Beloved Wife and Mother--" Names. He had tried to find his own among them once, but not one of the Hazards had ever been named Wade that he knew. There were Richards, one Clint who had died in infancy, two Daniels, one killed in the Spanish-American War in a town whose name no one could pronounce, one McQuade, three Josephs, including his grandfather who had died before the boy was born, and lastly one Robert. Wade's father was named Robert, too. The first one had settled the land in 1897 and was killed two years later in a boundary dispute with a neighbor, Joel Harris. Harris had stood by the roadside with a loaded shotgun, and when Robert Hazard had tried to drive his wagon across

the disputed land, Harris had blown him off the wagon seat.

The boy's grandfather had taken over the farm, then, and after he died, Wade's father had run it. His father hardly ever talked about the early days as if the past no longer mattered; only the driving ambition to survive in the best way possible remained. He didn't talk about the Depression or the desertion of his two brothers, Eric and Jim who left after the Second World War and lived now on the West Coast in a small California town. Neither of them had really been happy or settled in the income tax business as if handicapped by that desertion, unable to get what they wanted. Wade's uncle Eric was always complaining about "the boats that had missed him--journalism, music, chemical engineering, philosophy, college--there was no one to make him stick with any one of them." Rob Hazard had managed to get through three years of an agricultural and business school. Everyone had said he would have to sell out to live, but instead he had made the farm pay, adding a wife and a son--Wade's older brother Chuck--and ten years later Wade himself to the general prosperity.

Wade was five when they finally moved to town, his father sensing the end of small farming years before it was to come, picking out with the inherent Hazard ability a business that would catch the last of the farm trade and the first of the new energy pouring out from the giant cities like Chicago in waves of suburban projects. His father's feed store and lumber yard had nearly doubled in size in eight years. He had sent Chuck to college, able to pay part of the tuition, and was planning the same for Wade when the time came. Chuck was in his last year, and he was planning another four years to get two more degrees for his career as a chemist in agriculture. Wade's father had felt

it was worth it, especially since Chuck had been granted a fellowship that would cover all expenses.

Yet sometimes Wade would catch his father staring at the horizon's edge as though waiting for an enemy to come. What was he thinking? the boy often wondered. He, too, had felt the same harsh stare and could not understand what it saw, if anything, or what it was watching for, if anything. His father still owned their farmland, although after the first year in town they never went out to see it. His father seemed to keep the land as security against failure.

His mother Kay Hazard had always wanted him to sell, but her will alone, even coupled with her woman's flesh and its persuasion, could not break this one last hold; and she had had to retreat behind a demand that they sell off all the machinery and livestock they could. She had never really accepted the farm, sensing in it an endurance and fecundity that would wear down her sporadic, nervous energy before she would ever be able to make any difference in the way the farm looked.

The farmhouse and barn had burned one summer night when Wade was six. His mother told them then that she had always been torn between wanting to leave the farm as it was and burning it down herself.

"They would have known then," she had said, her slate-blue eyes narrowed, "that I'd been there."

Wade straddled one of the headstones and looked across the weed-covered field to Issac Harris's woods where straight, gray trees fringed a darker center. The boy had never been in there, although they had passed the woods once a week on the way to church; until his parents changed from Congregational to the First Methodist when their minister

had changed over.

His nostrils expanded as though to catch an unfamiliar scent, something moving, touching him as he sat quietly. He didn't even know where it was he wanted to go, only that a strange and painful restlessness kept him there to find or be found by something. Fall made him feel so earth-bound, as if he had been left behind again.

The boy watched as a crow circled over the woods, its harsh, scolding cry the only sound in the stillness. The bird swooped as if to touch the branches, veered off and up with slow, powerful wingstrokes, then glided out of sight behind the trees. Wade hesitated, then, as though the bird had called him, started for the woods.

At first he stayed near the outskirts, reluctant to go in too far where the deepening quiet seemed to hide some threat behind its screen of brilliant leaves. Dense underbrush grew in snarls around trees, catching their leaves until some of the shrubs looked as though they had sprouted crowns of red and yellow.

Wade found a thin, slow stream curving through the web of branches and sparse wildflowers, and he followed it until a path seemed to open in front of him leading back into the woods where sunlight fell in streams to the damp ground. It smelled cool and fecund, a little like vegetation too ripe to do anything but decay back into the earth. He liked the feel of his shoes pressing into the leaves underfoot, moving so quietly that he began to feel like his own shadow.

Before he even knew how far he had come and that he was lost, Wade burst through to Harris's clearing, startling the horse who snorted and moved off a few feet, then looked back at him, the long, slender ears

tensed forward like daggers. A jay bird was screeching above the boy, but Wade was still for so long, leaning against the barbed wire fence, that the bird stopped and swayed on its slender branch, watching him with sharp, black eyes.

After the woods, the sun seemed to pour into the clearing, etching every fence post and blade of grass, every shingle in Harris's house and barn with a thin edge of gold. The white frame house seemed boarded up, and the dirt road curving from behind the trees up to the barn was over grown with weeds.

The stallion had not gone back to grazing but stood motionless as the grass and waited. Wade moved slowly under the fence, studying the horse as if he had never seen one before. The brilliant, black eyes stared back at him calm and unafraid, their intensity backed by all the power latent in the big red-gold body that assumed an air of propriety over the whole clearing. The stallion's hide was matted with burrs and mud, and his reddish mane and tail were tangled like unruly grass, but Wade hadn't even noticed them at first. He felt as though a man were scrutinizing him, something in the stallion's gaze concentrated and inaccessible.

Wade walked to the house, feeling the stallion's eye on him the whole way. He had to pound on the screened door before Harris heard him. The man pushed the door half open and leaned one arm against the jamb, loosening thin flakes of white paint that crackled as they came away. The acrid smell of sweat and tobacco was like the Town Tap bar where his father sometimes went after closing up the lumber yard. Harris's eyes as they rested on Wade seemed unable to express much

beyond a vague suspicion.

"That horse out there--could I, after school, I mean, kind of feed him and keep him brushed--"

"What's your name, boy?" Harris's voice cut in flatly. He spoke as though chewing the words.

"Wade Hazard. I live back off the highway there--"

"Oh yeah. Know your folks. Don't see 'em much now, though, or anybody else since my boy went off. Berkleys still around you--Oh, yeah. You don't work the farm no more."

"Dad said the oldest Berkley boy left last year. Is it all right about the horse?" Wade asked, but Harris seemed not to hear.

He pushed slowly past the boy and eased himself into a porch chair, his body flowing into the hard wooden edges and hanging over on the sides. He took a dirty pink handkerchief and wiped his face even though the wind was cool.

"Yeah, it's happening that way now. Sons leaving the farms and the farms going to hell. I got plans for this place, though. You wait 'til my boy gets out of that state hospital. I'll get him settled in farming. Nothing as solid as farming. Yessir, things ain't change since I been on this place, well, now, sixty-three years it'll be this November." He scratched his side slowly, digging into the stained overalls, then looked up at Wade. "That horse ain't to be ridden, you know."

It was a moment before the boy realized Harris was answering his question.

"Yes," he said, "all right."

"More'n I can see why the girl wants to hang onto him--my

girl Gloria, she's the one bought him to be a hunter or some damn thing. Says he wouldn't let her ride him, so instead of selling the horse off she brings him up here where I got to provide feed and waste good money shoeing him. She's going to use him as a stud, she says." Harris's chuckle turned into a dry cough, and he cleared his throat harshly, spitting at the porch end. "He's as wore out as me. Make him a stud. That horse and me are going six feet under together--you can bet on that." He was silent for a moment, staring at the horse. When his voice reached Wade again disgust and weariness seemed to roughen it.

"Plans. I got to stop thinking about plans. Ain't ever going to work out. Just like that horse, I'll set back and let things fall where they want, that's all, just fall where they want. If my boy ain't going to get out of that hospital...well, all right, and if he ain't ever going to take this farm and make it pay, well, all right for that, too. I'll just sit back and let 'em take what they want. You know they will."

"Yes, sir," Wade said, not at all sure what he was agreeing to, only sure that he and Harris saw the stallion differently.

"You watch. They'll get everything in the end. Well, I ain't going to fight it--not that I'm complaining. I'm too old to do that. Only it don't seem fair somehow that things don't ever work out even when a man wants them to so bad he lays awake nights thinking about it and thinking about it." He looked up at Wade. "Well, then, there's his shed to be cleaned out and he'll need a good grooming everyday. I ain't had time to look after it myself."

Wade glanced around him at the barn whose sagging, unpainted boards looked as though a strong wind would blow them into the dust.

A few head of dairy cattle stood in ankle-deep mud and stared sightlessly at the encircling woods.

"I'll take care of the shoeing, but you see his hooves is kept clean. Watch out for his left hind leg. Sometimes he kicks. Just be sure you get here regular. I can't be watching the farm and you, too."

His face, now that the question was settled, seemed to lose its expression as though a hand had passed over it and wiped it clean, leaving only a gray stubble that circled his jaw like a half moon.

To one side of the house a rusted cultivator stood in a driveway that was no longer used. No one knew why he kept it there. It was huge, made to be hitched to a tractor, only Harris hadn't owned a tractor in years. His son Earl, in a fit of fury at something Harris had done or something he imagined Harris had done, had once tried to have the cultivator hauled away, and Harris had knocked him down in front of the junk dealer who had come to take it. "It was here before you," he said.

Earl had gone crazy the summer after that. Some said that it was the loneliness. He was thirty-one and unmarried, had never been out of McHenry county and had no one at the farm but his father and fifteen-odd head of dairy cattle. His mother had died when he was young, taking, people said, one of the only two ways it was possible to get off Harris's place. His two sisters had taken the other way by marrying. Others said he hated farming, had probably been born hating it as some are, and had never, for all his wild schemes and plans, been able to get away on his own. Whatever it was, Wade remem-

bered how it had brought him to the edge of his property with a twelve-gauge shotgun, daring those who passed to step one inch off the dirt road onto his land.

Wade had been five then, and riding with his father on the hay wagon with their cultivator tied down behind them, taking it to Berkley who had ruined his plowing up a field that was mostly rock and gravel. He remembered how hot it had been, the dust from the road gritting in his teeth, his throat rough and dry. His father had said quietly,

"What the hell?"

and Wade had looked up to see the sheriff, Duane Anderson, standing beside his patrol car, trying to talk Earl out of shooting anybody or any cultivator that happened to step on his land. Wade had felt a sickening lurch in the pit of his stomach as Earl had turned and the enormous eyes of the shotgun faced them. The patrol car had blocked one side of the road, and Anderson had told Wade's father,

"You just hold up a minute, Rob, while I move this. Then I want you to take yourself and that boy out of here."

His father had not seemed to hear, only saying with a firmness Wade had never known anyone or anything to defeat, "Leave that car where it is."

The next thing Wade knew he was off the wagon, having been swung down by his father, and he and Anderson were watching the wagon and two gray draft horses start past them. The horses were sweating in the heat, their virile, pungent smell filling the air as they came closer until the boy could see nothing but the huge bodies and trembling flanks and the hooves driving into the dust that rose in a fine, gold

haze. Then he could see Earl Harris twisting eagerly inside his stiff, buff-colored shirt as he ducked under the fence and rested his shotgun on the top wire, following the wagon as if moved slowly past.

The grays had to swing out to clear the car, and Wade saw the wagon slide until the cultivator caught the sun's oblique rays, and his father had to lean to one side, talking quietly, firmly to the horses. He slapped the reins harder, urging the grays on, not hurrying them, only keeping them on the road to swing the wagon back up the incline. But the wagon refused to turn as though drawn magnetically to Harris's land, deeper into the shoulder with every slow turn of the wheels until the frayed edge of Earl's property was less than a foot away.

The shoulder should have crumbled beneath the weight of the wagon, but it didn't. Instead the wagon seemed to find a hard layer under the loose dirt and began to rise slowly toward the center road. Wade remembered looking underneath the wagon at Earl Harris's legs as he darted through the wire and grabbed hold of the tailgate, then at the ropes lashing the cultivator down, jerking at them until his whole body shook with the violence of it. The sheriff started around the wagon for Earl, only by then Wade could see the stiffness go out of the man's legs as he let go, falling back against the fence post with the shotgun sagging in his long, thin arms.

Wade never forgot the look in his eyes, a blue, sightless stare that saw none of them, probably understood nothing except what had brought him there and what made him take the gun.

The wagon stopped in the middle of the road; they could hear

the horses blowing as if they had pulled a load of iron. Wade's father ducked his head against his arm, wiping the sweat off his face. Wade ran past the sheriff who was radioing ahead that he was bringing Earl in. His father's hand shook slightly as he pulled the boy up on the wagon seat beside him. Wade looked back in time to see the sun flash off the shotgun barrel as Earl swung it up to his shoulder, taking aim just as the sheriff caught the smooth, swift motion out of the corner of his eye, and his hand leaped convulsively at the service revolver on his hip. Even Wade could see that he would be too late, when they heard in the clear, and for the boy, perfect silence the dry snick of two hammers falling on their empty chambers.

The circuit judge had found Earl mentally incompetent, and the younger Harris was committed to the state hospital in Elgin, a town not far from West Lake. Harris had gone to see him once, Ed Berkley told Wade's father later. "He ain't even going again. The doc told him it wouldn't do no good."

The memory troubled Wade. In that blank stare he had sensed something like another world, more violent, senseless, an inner absorption so complete it knew nothing else. His father afraid and yet facing it as if he knew instinctively it was something not to be talked at but overcome.

Something in the stallion had touched the boy with the power of an old memory, and it wasn't until he began walking home from Harris's farm that he realized it was the same suggestion of another world, this one darker, more potent than any he had felt before, intruding into his thoughts like an insinuation.

CHAPTER II

The house smelled stuffy when he walked in, as though it had been closed for months against fresh air, and its warmth made his nose and ears tingle. His mother was in the kitchen. A thin haze of grease smoke veiled the ceiling and overhead light, hanging in slender layers like cobweb.

The florescent light on the stove gave his mother's sallow, rather coarse skin a bluish tint that settled in darker patches under her eyes and cheekbones. She was only a little taller than Wade and not much heavier, moving with an inspired efficiency as though everything she did involved a challenge. She had sheets of paper with names carefully numbered on each one of them: they were spread over the kitchen table, and she was reading a magazine, marking passages with a gold pen when something struck her as particularly good. His mother complained about being the only one who organized programs or committees when they were needed, but he knew she would have been very unhappy if someone else tried to take the responsibility away from her.

"Well, where have you been?" she asked, brushing his hair back which hung down like the forelock on a colt and automatically zipping up his jacket. "You smell like woodsmoke."

"Mom, I found out Issac Harris owns a horse, and he said I could come out after school and take care of him. Is it all right?"

She peered at him over the magazine.

"And what have you done for your country today?"

The question always disconcerted him as if at bottom she really meant it.

"Mom, come on. What about it?"

"Listen to this." She was reading again. "'Community action is possible only when adequately prepared for. No venture is going to succeed when forced on the public.' I think I'll bring that up at the next circle meeting. Betty Hilton and I want to start a community action program with Kiwanis. They're raising money to get an auditorium for the high school."

"Mom, about the horse. Is it okay? Mr. Harris said--"

"If your father says it's all right. Just make sure you get your homework done. Chuck's home--he has a paper to do this week-end, so I want you to be quiet. And make sure you stay off that horse. I don't want to have somebody come and tell me you've broken your nose or worse, your neck."

"All right."

"Have you been rolling on the ground? That jacket feels damp."

"No, it was the woods."

She went back to the magazine article, and Wade sat down at the table watching her. She seemed to create around her a sense of order that made him feel safe. He felt she would always know what to do. His mother was the only one he knew who could get around his father.

They had met at a dance in the Congregational church when his father had been going to agricultural school. Her parents had lived on a farm in Kansas long enough for her to know the drudgery of it, and when she married Rob it had been with the understanding they would

not stay on the farm for more than a few years.

Yet as much as he admired his mother, Wade had to admit that she had a dogmatic streak that at times puzzled him by its unsympathetic blindness. The mother of one of his friends, Ralph Hanson, had never really been accepted her.

"You can't tell me she's gone ten years without a man," she had said, believing the rumor that Alvina kept one of the truck drivers and had him out to her house whenever he came through. Everyone knew Ralph's father had run off and left his wife with a three-year-old boy, half a month's rent due on their house, and a 1948 Chevy that would run only in the summer. Wade had always liked them, and it hurt him to think that his mother, in some curiously righteous and unforgiving woman's way felt superior to, or, not exactly that, but more acceptable than Alvina. It was in the air when they had first met, something not only the two women but the two boys could feel, something that would not yield--not outrage, but indignation that a sacred law had been violated.

"Wade, get that jacket off. I can smell it from here. Go on, put it in the hamper upstairs, and don't forget to wash for dinner while you're up there."

"It just smells like horses. I like it--"

"Wade."

He went upstairs but to his room and flung himself on the bed, leaving the light off. It was getting darker quickly now, the sun like a slow, subdued fire behind the trees. He was glad his room faced north and west. He liked the way the sky looked better at night than in the

morning; there seemed to be a greater purity to the light, gathering to it all the color faded at noon and burned away at dawn.

A picture of wild ducks hung above his desk. It showed five mallards rising from a reed-whipped marsh, only in the dimness of his room it looked like a single bird, black, tremendous, its wings and neck stretched out like a bow about to break. The picture was left over from the time last year when he had wanted to raise wild ducks. Birds were always doing something interesting. If you just happened to be looking out the window and one or two of them flew into your line of vision, you just had to watch them--you couldn't look anywhere else. He had wanted to band two or three ducks and let them go in the fall, and when they came back in the spring they'd nest in his back yard and he could watch the flock grow, carry on his own wildlife experiments, find out where they went for the winter. But somehow the idea had never gotten farther than his head. Wild birds, anything wild, was like a mystery, and even if you found out where they went and what they did, there was still the mystery left.

He heard a chair scrape down the narrow hallway. From his bed Wade could see a wedge of light under Chuck's door. He wondered what Chuck was working on. Last time it had been DDT compounds, and before that he and Rob had discussed nitrogen additives and the feasibility of soilless growth.

Wade had always thought of Chuck as another adult, more intimately bound up with his parents and at the same time more independent of them. Chuck had never spent much time with Wade. The boy vaguely remembered going to high school football games and freezing in the blue

November air while the team hurled itself again and again at the enemy line and everyone around Wade threw paper cups and rolls of toilet paper. Only in the crowd of yellow and black jerseys, Wade had never been able to tell which one was his brother.

Now and then Chuck brought his girls home, but they all seemed to have blue eyes and short blond or brown hair and laugh nervously in the dark living room where afterward the couch would smell of their perfume. They had names like Kathy or Pat or Sandy but never any last names that Wade could remember.

Chuck had fallen in love with one of them, and then lost her to the Honor Society President who was also voted all-conference quarterback. Wade remembered hearing him crying in the dark one night, the sound filling the boy with pain and terror, because he did not understand, had not then and did not really now, what he had been crying for.

The only time he remembered crying at night was when he had hurt his leg, and the pain of it had dragged him out of sleep. The day before he and Ralph had had a test to see who could stand the most pain. They had peeled willow switches and slashed at each other's bared legs. Red marks like long scratches streaked their calves, and still neither would give up, the hollow woosh of the switch cutting the air before it cut the flesh until finally Ralph's last blow had drawn blood, and he wouldn't go on. Wade even then hadn't cried out, and some young pride, animal pride kept him from telling his mother about it. It gave him a sense of power over himself to sit quietly through dinner, but later in the night it became like a flame wrapping

his leg. His mother had been scared and angry when she saw the infection. His father told him never to hide anything like that again, that he would rather pay a small medical bill now than a big one later on. Then he told Wade for the third time about a governor's son who had died from an infected blister in his heel. For a whole day Wade watched in terror for the ominous red streaks to start from the cuts toward his heart.

There was a pride in bearing pain, he thought. It made him feel as though he were hardening himself for some trial in the future. Chuck always let everyone know when he hurt; he wanted them to fuss over him.

When Chuck had gone to college Wade had only been seven, and his brother became a presence who came home three times a year and played ragtime on the piano when they had had a piano, who even began to talk in a technical language unintelligible to the boy.

The only thing they liked in common was camping, but after Chuck had taken Wade out to White Pines park for a week-end and nearly lost him in the immense forest, they never went out again. Wade didn't mind. Chuck had spent nearly the whole night swearing at the mosquitoes and trying to keep the fire smoking enough to drive them away. Only he had kept everything else away, too. Wade had felt something on the edge of the darkness lean in on them whenever the fire sank to a few guttering coals, but he never knew what it was, and in the daylight it wasn't there at all. He had tried sitting out by himself one night at home, but he was afraid of the dark and had come in before the fear got too strong.

He turned on his desk light. Downstairs the front door slammed, and his father stamped the dust off his shoes. He had the heaviest tread of anyone Wade knew, coming down on each foot as if the ground needed leveling. There was a sense of blindness to the sound, as if it recognized no one's right, no one's will but its own. Wade had always been impressed with his father's lack of uncertainty, and he often wondered if the man had been born knowing how to live in the world.

Wade threw the jacket in the clothes hamper. His hands smelled like yellow soap now and not the woods. He wondered how to tell his father about the horse without bringing up all kinds of consequences, other things he didn't want to talk about. As he came down the stairs he heard his mother saying,

"Wade wants to know if he can take care of some horse he found today. Oh, Ed Berkley called. He wants to order four thousand pounds of the new feed you got in, the alfalfa mixture--"

"I told him it wouldn't be until next month the suppliers could deliver. I don't know, that feed store makes less and less money every year. I'm going to have to shut it down pretty soon. What horse?"

Wade sat down at the table next to his father.

"Can I, Dad? Take care of him, I mean. It would be after school, and I could get all my work done when I get home."

"What horse?"

"I told him to ask you," Kay said. She pushed a strand of light brown hair behind her ear. "Just so he doesn't break his neck."

"Dammit, what horse?" his father roared.

"Issac Harris's," Wade said. "He's a hunter--"

"Harris?"

"No, the horse. Mr. Harris says his daughter bought him to hunt with only she couldn't ride him."

"Is he mean--got any tricks?"

"No--"

"How do you know?"

Wade squirmed. "I just know--"

"You just know. Here you go again, off half-cocked. Last year all we heard about were those damn ducks. The year before that it was malamutes or wolves. I don't think you've stuck with a single thing since you first noticed there were other things besides food and drink world. You don't have enough grit, my lad. You spend your time dreaming about something and have no idea how to get it or how to stick with getting it."

Wade said nothing.

"The bigger the animal, the less you fool with it, I've told you that often enough." Rob took the carving knife and began whipping it across the sharpening stone. "Is it a stallion?"

"Yes, sir."

"Even more reason not to mess around with him. Why couldn't Harris's daughter ride him?"

"I don't know," Wade said, reddening under his father's gaze.

"You didn't ask."

"Please, Dad, couldn't I? You always say I never stick with anything. Wouldn't this make me if I gave Harris my word I'd be there

every afternoon, wouldn't that make him depend on me?"

The knife whipped back and forth with a shrill, thin sound, the blade gleaming blue-black in the light.

"Remember two days ago I told you to take those screens up to the attic?"

Wade had forgotten. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"And before that it was cleaning out the garage."

"Yes, sir."

"You've still got to learn there are consequences for everything that's done or left undone. And your school record--what about that? Last year bordered on disaster. You'll be going into high school soon, and you've got to start shaping up on your own. Now you want me to give you something for nothing. Do you think that's reasonable?"

Wade said nothing, staring at the plate in front of him. He could hear his mother moving back and forth between the stove and table, moving quietly.

"Just like each one of us has got to contribute to the family income. Pretty soon you'll have to start thinking about jobs for the summer, maybe in the lumber yard. Look around, see what needs to be done and then do it without having to be told umpteen dozen times. Everybody's got to do their share or somebody else ends up with twice as much work. Do you see?"

"Yes, sir," Wade said, keeping his voice, his face neutral. "I'll do my work. I'll do all of it, just couldn't I--about the horse--" He could not keep the pleading note out of his voice and it was like the knife whipping back and forth inside him. His father looked at his face

as though the desperate wanting Wade felt showed through as clearly as the color of his eyes.

"What horse?" Chuck asked. He swung his leg over the back of his chair and sat down. "You want a horse, Wade? What the hell for?"

"No, it's one he found at Issac Harris's," his mother said.

Wade caught the warning glance she threw at his brother. Chuck looked at Rob, then Wade and understood. His eyes, deep-set like his father's, seemed to peer out from under a shelf, and he shrugged, the wide, slender shoulders falling loosely forward.

"Harris, isn't he on welfare or something?" Chuck asked.

"I wouldn't doubt it," Rob said. "He sits on his ass and lets the farm go down the drain and then takes the money other people break their backs making. His kind really gripe me. They live off the rest of us, and then they have the gall to demand more, demand, dammit, like we owed them a living. A bunch of parasites couldn't have a better set-up."

"Dad--" Wade's voice was like a futile tug at his father's arm.

"Well, the government does it," Chuck said. "Somebody's got to see they don't starve, I guess. What burns me like hell is the politicians can pay out that kind of money, but the minute the school get a little out of line, pow, the funds for research are cut off."

Rob banged his fist on the table.

"Well, I sure don't like the idea of paying for some professor to stand up and preach about how rotten everything is. Let him preach on his own time and money if he wants to so bad. Like that nut, what's-his-name out in California, something Thomas. He refused to turn a

list of names over to a senate committee hearing, because he said he promised to keep the names secret. I think he's got something to hide."

"Students--thirty-five and over," his mother said, sitting down across from Rob.

"Right. Who do they think they're kidding?"

"Well, maybe this Thomas guy really believes in what he's doing," Chuck said. "I'm not saying that I--"

"You can't tell me that. If he hasn't got anything to hide, why not give them the names? What could happen?"

"Maybe he doesn't accept the authority of the committee, that they should have the right to make him--"

"If they're working for legitimate ends, there should be no reason for him not to turn over those names. The whole thing smells."

"But if Thomas is an idealist," Chuck said, his voice struggling against the accumulated weight of his father's conviction, "if he practises what he says, then he's got to refuse what the committee asks. It's like the sum of two numbers, given one condition and a second condition, it's just got to follow that the third is true--"

"You're telling me you know what an idealist is? Twenty-three and you know what an idealist is?"

"Well--hell, yes, you think I'm retarded or something?"

"All right," Kay said, her voice cutting through their words. "Why don't we let it drop and say grace? I didn't cook everything just to let it get cold. Wade? Why don't you say it?"

"But, Dad, about the horse--"

"If I hear another word about that damned horse--"

"Wade, say grace."

Wade bowed his head, glancing up to see the muscle jump along his father's jaw, beating mechanically. Chuck's hand on the table was crushing his napkin. His mother waited with bowed head, but the rigid line of her back seemed indomitable.

"Dear God, thank you for the food before us," the words old as ritual on his tongue, "and the strength we have, to use in Thy service, and to help all the animals, Amen."

They ate in silence for a long moment, the only sound knives scraping against plates, glass ringing loudly against the serving bowls, until at last his mother laid down her silverware and looked steadily at his father.

"Rob, about the horse."

His father stared at Wade; the hard, blue eyes seemed to reflect back all they saw and have no depth, no subtlety to them, a look he had never been able to meet.

"I don't want to hear about you quitting this in the middle."

"No, sir."

"I want more responsibility and efficiency from you. Let's try to make this one of your better years."

"I promise, Dad."

His father waved the words away. "Promises don't mean a thing with you; they go out of your head the minute you utter them. I want to see results."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then. It's settled. Let's not hear anymore about it."

Wade looked at his mother, but she was staring at the table in front of her. That made him feel a little guilty, as he always felt when she had to intervene for him. Yet she had always known how to play on his father's moods without his father being that much aware of it. It was as though she applied rules and principles gleaned from her little magazines and found that they always worked.

Wade thought about the stallion. Would they work with him, too? But a woman had failed with the horse. Maybe he had broken through that peculiar female prescience, put himself beyond it just by the sheer size and power of his body--not fighting her exactly but refusing to obey and act like a horse was expected to act. But the boy had caught a glimpse of something more than brute energy in the stallion's eyes, something like the naked gleam of a knife blade, carrying with it a hint of wickedness and animal cunning. And yet, even then, there was more, the intimation of some knowledge.

CHAPTER III

At first he didn't think about riding the stallion at all.

He had never really loved horses. They had always been remote, even the draft horses on the farm, there without really being there, pulling hay wagons, sometimes plows, filling up half a movie screen, coming last in a parade. But the stallion was different, and he fascinated the boy.

Wade spent the first few days cleaning out the shed that stood near one corner of the pasture. It smelled pungently of manure and musty oats, of old wood, straw, dampness of age that had had years to decay the roof beams and window frames. A rusted water bucket hung beside a manger that sagged loosely along one wall. The only light inside was a bare electric bulb coated with dust.

Wade had wanted to enlarge the window and get more light into the stall, replace the rotting floorboards and beams. He sketched his plans for Harris, even drawing up with his father's help and approval, a list of materials and expenses and how long it would take to complete the work. Harris had listened in stupified silence, and then walked away, shaking his head and chuckling hoarsely to himself. Wade watched him go back toward the house. The paper with his plans neatly sketched on it fluttered unnoticed to the ground.

Wade took the rusted water pail out of the shed and flung it as far as he could over the pasture fence into the woods. The next day he bought an aluminum bucket. The stallion stretched his nose toward it

curiously, snorting at the scent of aluminum as if remembering it from somewhere else, Wade thought. The horse plunged his muzzle into the water and splashed it over the floor, flipping it far enough to reach Wade who had stood back to watch.

"Hey, cut it out," he said, brushing the water out of his hair. "You ain't a colt anymore. Settle down."

The shed rang with the stallion's tremulous, vibrant neigh as if he had suddenly found a voice, and there was a note of joy, almost of triumph in the sound.

Wade heard the front door of the house slam, and he looked up to find that the porch where Harris usually sat was empty. The door gaped black like the entrance to a cave. Wade had once caught sight of dirty dishes piled on a table, cloth tacked over open windows and a long smear of something burned and hardened like lava down the stove side. There was no heat in the house. Wade could hear the soft, silibant whisper of something moving rapidly in one corner, tiny squeaks pricking at the silence.

Wade looked back at the stallion who was watching the house, too, his black, brilliant eyes glinting wickedly from his naked head. The boy filled the pail again, and the stallion drank quietly, one slender ear cocked, listening to the boy's footsteps first on the ground outside and then in the dry, rustling straw that covered the shed floor.

ii

Wade had wanted to tell Ralph about the horse, but the two of them were not as close as they had been. Ralph was now part of a

gang led by Jerry Redquist, a boy two years older than Wade but who had flunked fourth and fifth grades. He had a fine pale stubble of beard, white hair and almost albino skin, and eyes that were a flat, pebble gray. He was tall and angular, his face still small as if it hadn't caught up with his body. At his first school near Chicago, he had set up an extortion ring and protection racket, the younger boys paying him fifty cents a week to keep his gang from beating them up. He had tried to start another racket at north school, but the school was too small to have kept it secret.

Everyone had known almost instinctively what Redquist was the first day he had come to class. It was as if a telephathic message had flashed around the school, a perception of some evil that invaded, lived on the secret wishes of the others and used them. Before half the fall term was over, Jerry had a loyal following. He had been in jail once, and every time he told the story, he added a few more rats and cockroaches, made the jailer a little more afraid of him.

Wade had stayed away from him, seeing there not only the evil but the essential stupidity of that evil. Jerry had left Wade alone and worked on Ralph. Wade had beaten Redquist twice in the 600-yard walk-run and could outthink him on a ball field, but Wade could sense that he was waiting for his chance, the fight time, the right advantage.

Wade had been going to Harris's farm after school for only a week when Jerry found out about it. Wade was sitting with five other boys on the merry-go-round waiting for the noon bell to ring, when he saw Jerry and his gang looking in his direction, then come over to where he was sitting. Ralph wedged himself between Wade and a fourth grader

and tried to start the merry-go-round by pushing with his feet. Redquist looking down on him, chewed thoughtfully on a stalk of dry grass. The wind was cold, blowing under a leaden cover of clouds. Wade braced himself against Ralph's efforts.

"I'll bet I know something about you," Jerry said.

Wade was silent, but the other boys around him turned toward Redquist, and when he saw he had their attention, he nudged the boy next to him and grinned.

"Billy and me went squirrel shooting yesterday, and I saw you going into Harris's woods."

He paused but Wade said nothing. Two third graders started fighting over a jump rope, and the teacher on duty, Mr. Jeffers Wade's English instructor, took them inside.

"What you got in there, Wade?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah, Wade, what you got in there?" one of the boys behind Jerry asked. His heavy-lidded eyes gleamed with a momentary spark of interest. He was heavy and slow; they had called him Block for so long Wade had forgotten his real name. Jerry folded his arms across his chest.

"Whyn't you show us what it is? We got all day after school."

Wade felt his heart racing, because he didn't want any of them near the stallion, and he couldn't have said why. Don't let them see what you're thinking, he told himself.

"Ralph, what do you think he's got in there?" Jerry asked.

"Show us, Wade," Ralph grinned and nudged Wade with his elbow.

Wade knocked the arm away savagely, then stared straight ahead catching sight of a black labrador retriever that stayed near the school

and begged scraps at lunch.

"Berkley's dog was chasing a rabbit," Wade said, "and he wanted me to catch him."

"I didn't see no dog," Jerry said.

"Maybe he's got a girl in there," Billy said. The other boys laughed, and Jerry pointed to a thin, sullen girl standing alone by the school door.

"That's who he's got--Laura Freeman. Birdlegs."

Another boy shouted to the girl, "Hey, Birdlegs! What do you and Wade do in the woods?"

"I know," Redquist said, and whispered something to the rest of them. They laughed and Wade flushed hotly, bracing his feet against the stronger push of Ralph and two others who were trying to turn the merry-go-round, and knowing that he was going to lose, he got up only to find that Redquist blocked his way.

"Just a minute, Wade," Jerry said softly. He leaned closer and put one hand lightly on Wade's shoulder. Wade could smell the stale tobacco and cheap beer that always seemed to hang around Jerry. "You haven't told us what you got in the woods yet."

Wade felt rather than heard Ralph behind him, and for a moment the hairs on the back of his neck tingled apprehensively until Ralph said,

"Jeffers'll be back. Let him go, Jerry."

Redquist looked at him, then turned back to Wade. Wade felt his hand tighten, digging into his shoulder, pressing on the collarbone. He stared back at Jerry the way he had trained himself to stare at his father so many times, face carefully blank.

"What is it?" Jerry asked again, his voice harder now.

"Nothing."

The buzzer rang and Jerry grinned, then pushed him away. His shoulder hurt, but Wade didn't touch it, feeling the pain like the pulse of his blood. I stuck it out, he thought. I know about pain, more pain than he'll ever know how to give.

Even the chant of the boys following him toward the school door failed to touch him. "Wade's got a girl friend," they said, the tramp of their feet in time to the words. He bore that and the pain with a secret, exulting pride.

iii

Later he was afraid they would try and follow him to Harris's place. He was careful never to go out and return by the same path, and often he would stop, listening for footsteps other than his own. He squatted near the ground, his feet growing numb slowly, breathing in the cold air, not ever sure what he would do if Redquist or Ralph or any of the others came along.

Before he had always gone through the woods more or less blindly, thinking only about the horse. Now he felt the woods had come alive with a transient danger that made his nerves grow taut like an extra sense. He crouched in the shadows, instinctively facing the wind to catch scents that his nose was too dull to catch. It was as if something had opened to admit him, but what lay ahead he couldn't tell.

Once, sitting by the path to see if he had been followed, he found himself staring at an old tree opposite him. He had passed it

before but never seen it, and now its deeply grooved trunk seemed alive with a strange, almost animal vitality. Wade watched it, fascinated. Its deep clefts and folds of bark twisted around the tree, seemed in the late autumn sun to be infinite in depth and harbor life Wade had never known existed. He closed his eyes tightly, as if sinking into one of those black clefts, listening to the twigs snapping, the soft, rustling movements of small animals and the wind rubbing leaves and heavy branches together; and he felt around himself a rush of space, pushing back the closeness of shrubs around him, a space within a huge dome and each sound came from that vast and eternally echoing cavern, each echo creating its source again, until the whole of it trembled, vibrated with a life that seemed to him forever beyond death.

At home his father said, "I'll admit you haven't goldbricked on a single job yet, but don't let me catch you starting."

But the words sounded strange, as though talking about something that had nothing to do with the boy anymore. He listened, but his father's voice was not like the sounds in the woods; the words fell within him and vanished.

What he heard now was something deep inside, a tongueless cry, an ache that had awakened and nothing would satisfy. Only when he was near the horse and breathing in the warm scent of the stallion did the tightness in him go away. He had to stop himself from getting on the horse and riding out of the pasture, anywhere, it didn't matter, just to be moving. Gradually the promise he had made to Harris, to his mother, was pushed back into one of the compartments in his head, and a door

closed softly, permanently on it.

The stallion had been skittish at first, wary of the boy being too close. No matter where the horse was in the long, narrow pasture, by the shed or at the far end of the fenceline, he always knew when and where Wade was coming out of the woods. The boy would see him standing like a rugged sculpture in the tall, dry grass, the ears forward, nostrils flaring to catch the boy's scent.

Wade had had to learn patience. He had to be content with cleaning out the shed and watching the horse from a distance. The stallion didn't walk in the short-strided, draft horse way, but with long, sweeping strides where the hind leg overtook the front hoof by nearly six inches and gave the old body a grace Wade had only seen in cats. The horse's back was a little swayed, the neck bowed, the hindquarters a bit heavy, but his eyes were still clear and in them a look that commanded respect. He neither wanted nor asked for Wade to be there; alone but not lonely, distant, self-contained as a wild animal but without fear.

Wade watched how the prehensile upper lip brought the short chickory grass and wild oats to the large, yellow teeth that ripped the grass loose, and the muscles along the side of his face that rippled like tiny flames up the neck to a hollow space right before the shoulders lifted out. He watched the tight swell of muscle above the hock and his powerful hindquarters, the flank crinkling as the hind leg swept forward.

When the horse got used to Wade, even seemed to be waiting for him, Wade combed the burrs out of his long mane and tail and brushed the sorrel hide, growing shaggy with approaching winter. He ran his

hand down the sloping shoulder and felt the stallion's hide shudder as though ridding himself of flies. Wade pressed harder, trying to feel with his hand the curve and plane of muscle beneath the skin as if he could in that way discover what the horse really was. You couldn't drive him, Wade thought, you'd have to ask. Like a man, like an equal, because he knows something I don't, something that I have always felt in the dark and alone in the woods. He knows.

His father had told Wade that animals got to know a person through his voice as well as through his hands, so from the start he was trying to tell the horse everything about himself he could think of, how he was trying to see things, understand, how hard it had always been to know what he wanted, but all that was changed; he knew now. The stallion cocked one ear as if listening attentively, and now and then he would look up at Wade, the eyes subdued, almost appraising. But there was still in them a disturbing level, masked by a bluish color that seemed to veil a deeper wildness which Wade could not enter or know.

He went through the library at school, checking out more books in one week than he had in the past four years. He read at night with a flashlight under the covers until he fell asleep with the light still on and throwing grotesque shadows on the opposite wall of his room.

There were books on how to care for horses, how to train them, raise them. But more intriguing to the boy were the books he found on the mythology of horses, sacrifices and rituals Wade couldn't understand, horses as the source of divine wisdom, translating it to the men who could hear.

The horse was a savage, naked head with ears flattened, hooves trampling soldiers and carrying their riders over barricades and past spear points to hurl the line the war to the next battle, the next city, the distant nation. The horse had stamped in blood the conquerors' right to the New World, to its land and wealth. Power and conquest and blood--was that the knowledge the horse brought? But after the wars, without the frenzy of gunfire and the battle which seemed in the pictures like a red dream, after all that, what was the horse then?

There was another side; men who were able to understand not only the horse but the wildness behind it, the myth, and become part of that myth; men who could call animals to them by singing a certain song, could invoke their protection, create rituals that encompassed the whole rhythm and cycle of life. The horse became sacrifice again, the knowledge returning full circle, the animal both god and victim.

And behind it all, linking the ward and the mystery was the man on horseback, always moving, searching for something that had been lost or not yet found, searching from the moment they had been granted mobility and knowledge by the horse and the wildness with horse embodied. But searching for what? The books never explained. First nomads, then knights, then conquerors, then what? And even now, still searching as if retaining deep within the mind's eye that image of a man on horseback.

He thought of his father and two uncles, of all the Hazards, the ones who had survived and the ones who had vanished.

"Explorers?" his father mused. "No, I don't think any Hazard was ever an explorer. Of course there was your great uncle Charles who settled someplace in California, but he sold out and died of yellow

fever in New Orleans. At least that's what your great aunt always claimed." His father looked thoughtfully at him. One hand covered a stack of bills to be sent out in the morning. "What do you want to know that for?"

"Oh, I just wondered. Dad, is it possible for somebody to... well, call animals to them by thinking about it or something like that?"

"He'd have to be part animal himself if he could. Sure wish somebody'd call the damned corn weevils out of this state. If that brother of yours wants to make a fortune, all he has to do is invent a sure-fire pesticide for about thirty different varieties, beetles, weevils, kill 'em all off. I've never seen so damn many of them as this year. Every man who comes into the place complains about it. Last year it was starlings. What put all these explorer ideas in your head?"

"I was thinking about the horse--"

"What horse?"

"The one Harris--"

"On, that one." Rob put down his pen and looked steadily at Wade. "Listen, son, don't get yourself so mixed up with that horse that you start thinking about bringing him home. We can't afford to keep one, you know that."

"I know."

"But if you want one, well, start planning, working for it. We still have good farmland. If you want to work with horses, start there, maybe we won't have to sell it afterall." Rob looked at him in silence, then shook his head. "I wish I knew what goes on in that mind of yours."

Explorers, animal charmers, what the devil are you looking for?"

"Couldn't a man ever know animals, I mean really know them like I was telling you about, so that he could dall them without words?"

"No. They wouldn't hear you."

"The Indians did it."

"That's different."

"You mean they could do it and we can't? Why?"

"We weren't raised that way. I don't know--go look it up in the encyclopedia."

"It doesn't say anything about that."

"Then don't bother with it. If you want to crack a book, start working on history or English."

"But, Dad--"

"Go on, unless you want to sit here and lick stamps for the next hour."

He took the books back. He had never liked reading and understood only half of what the books were talking about. But he remembered the image of a man searching and of something separated from him, and not one of the books had been able to tell him what or why.

CHAPTER IV

Wade didn't say to himself, "Today I'll ride the horse," wasn't even thinking about it the day it happened.

He was looking at the path under his feet, going slowly and scuffing at the ground. The day before he had found a knife still in its sheath, half-buried in the dirt until his foot had kicked it up. Cleaning it off as well as he could, the boy had put it in a box under his bed. It was strange that the knife should have been buried there alone. He poked around in the same place for awhile, then gave it up. He wondered if finders-keepers applied in this case or whether he ought to tell somebody about the knife, maybe someone had lost it and was looking for it. But there had been no name beyond the barely visible letters "Ea" ending with an "s" stamped in gold on the back of the sheath.

His mother didn't like guns, knives, anything that looked capable of hurting an animal larger than a jaybird. She didn't mind too much when Wade had shot one of those, but she had made him feel guilty for weeks when he killed a rabbit, and he never liked using guns after that. She would stand, hands clasped in front of her, eyes downcast and filling with tears, staring at the dead animal until it seemed she took its suffering into herself. It was awful to have her look that way. His father had said it was just like a woman to weep over all God's cute, fluffy creatures, but if he had shot a rat there would have been no tears. Wade supposed it was true, but he had never gotten

any pleasure out of shooting since.

To him all animals were pretty much the same; he didn't really hate any of them. He had been taught which ones to avoid, not to bother bees, skunks, certain snakes. Maybe if he had lived around rats more it wouldn't bother him to see them slaughtered at the city dump every summer at night.

He remembered how the cars, creeping silently to the gravel pit, lights extinguished, had ringed one side of the dump and waited. When you could hear rats knocking over cans and fighting for garbage again, someone gave a signal and all the headlights blazed on, lighting up the dump from top to bottom, showing a living mound of rats. Their tiny red eyes had blinked in the glare.

Then the guns started, orange streaks flaming and the sound so blended and continuous it was like the single roar of a waterfall. They had cut off the tails and tallied them up. Over two hundred of them someone said. The county paid a quarter for each tail. Wade knew, but never said, just as the others knew, but never said, that it wasn't done for money.

It was like setting four or five dogs on a rabbit. By the time the dogs got through, there wasn't enough hide or meat to do anything with. He did not understand why they killed without using what they killed, or why the yearly summer slaughter brought out nearly every man and boy in McHenry county who owned a gun and could shoot well enough to keep from blowing off his foot off or putting a bullet through his neighbor. Wade had gone once, and then he stayed away. He did not hate the killing, although it disturbed him; it was the waste of it

puzzled him. It made him think of Earl Harris's blind stare.

He had watched, in the woods and sometimes on a dead animal by the highway, how a dozen different forms of life fed off that single corpse. Ants, worms, starlings, beetles, hollowing out the animal, carrying off whatever was edible, burying what was not, what only the earth could take back. There was a certain dignity in the slowness of the process, he felt almost of homage paid to what had been alive and what, really, never stopped being alive. He did not understand why people hated that process and drove off the birds or crushed the worms, shuddering in horror at what was only half finished and what they kept from burial.

Then he thought about the stallion and decided he would not like seeing the horse covered that way. But what was dead didn't mind, seemed to be waiting patiently for it to begin. It was strange. Maybe there was something about it he didn't see yet and that other people saw and hated.

The afternoons had been growing shorter, and he wanted to hurry through the brushing and get back home before darkness closed over the woods. But the stallion seemed skittish and restless. The air was colder, making the gray overcast seem even more bleak, and there was a smell of snow to things, a cool, metallic odor.

The stallion kept shifting away from the curry brush, snatching a few mouthfuls of grass, then roaming to another spot in the pasture where Wade caught up to him, only to have the same thing happen over again.

The wind tugged at the horse's mane, lifting it back along his neck like the crest of a wave. His head turned sharply to face whatever

way the wind was blowing, his eyes glowing black now, without any end to their depth as if the horse did not care if Wade saw all the wildness in him, because he did not even seem to notice whether or not the boy was there.

At last the stallion was still, staring at the darkening woods. Wade touched the horse's shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

The stallion flicked an ear back to show that he had heard, but didn't move. Wade could feel the muscles tightening beneath the thick, red-gold coat. He glanced at the house. It was dark and silent, Harris having gone into the barn to milk his cows. Back at the shed there was a wooden box propped against the wall. The stallion snorted suddenly and pawed at the dry grass. Wade looked at the box again and felt his heart racing.

He found two lead ropes in the shed and took them and the box out to where the horse stood. He didn't even seem to notice when Wade snapped the two lead ropes on his halter and threw the ropes across his withers.

Wade got up on the box, leaning against the taut, powerful body while he tried to slow the rapid heartbeat that seemed to struggle in his chest. There was still no sign of Harris.

He grabbed a thick handful of mane and started to pull himself on the horse's back. Instead he found himself being pulled off the box as the stallion snorted and shied away from him, ears flattened along his sleek, wicked head. Wade spoke quietly to the horse, moved the box over and tried again.

The horse was getting more nervous, tossing his head, shifting his balance like a colt at the starting gate. It was almost as if he felt Wade's youth flow into his own aged body, feeding there a desire, an instinct that hadn't lessened with time. Wade's saw the stallion's eye shining with a wild, fierce light, still looking at the far end of the pasture. His whole body seemed slick with a hot, vivid life, a body curved and hollowed against the wind and on fire with some secret purpose.

The horse was quiet just long enough for Wade to slip on his back. The minute he had gathered up the reins, the stallion moved off toward the far end of the pasture. Wade sat very straight, as his father had taught him to do when he had ridden the draft horses, his own movement completing the rhythm of the stallion's gait.

He felt the horse's warmth flow into his own legs until it seemed they were becoming part of the horse, his own will lost in both their movements as if they were one inseparable being. It confused him. His father had always said you should never let a horse forget that you expected obedience, but he couldn't get the right feeling of mastery for that.

There was a fierce tug at the reins, the stallion's neck arching into a tight, red curve, and he felt, too, the strong, fierce desire rise in himself. The stallion broke into a quick trot; and the boy leaned forward, letting his thoughts sink into the quickening beat as the stallion lunged into a canter, the muscles gathering and extending, the fluid power beneath Wade's knees like a shock through the boy until he forgot all about Harris and felt only the mane stinging his face

and the driving rise and fall of the hindquarters. The fenceline began to whip by faster and faster, and Wade crouched over the stallion's neck, clinging tightly while the wind tore at his jacket and numbed his face, and still he felt the stallion holding back, gathering for some final, furious effort.

They whipped past the shed, the stallion wheeling only when the fence turned him, and when he straightened out again, Wade was ready as the lunging strides lengthened, reached their peak and seemed to rocket them forward. Speed--the wind deafened him, seemed to suck the breath out of his lungs and his eyes dissolved in a guttering rim of tears. He could no longer see where they were going, only trust the stallion, enveloped by the virile, pungent scent of the horse until Wade had no thought left, just the blind instinct to hold on.

Each time at the turn it seemed they would crash into the fence, tearing themselves on the barbed wire and splintered fence posts, but each time the stallion slowed and wheeled in perfect control, the fire in him driving, ruling his body. This was why he couldn't be ridden, for it seemed he had forged his will to a demon, wild, implacable, who ruled a barbaric world older, uncontrollable where he and the horse loomed gigantic like a centaur, the mind and will one, the body one. It was like a madness.

Wade lost track of time. His arms and legs ached fiercely. He felt the stallion's stride falter, felt him strike the ground as though his joints were locked, jarring the boy until it became harder and harder to keep his balance. He was losing touch with the horse, no longer able to match the roughening gait with his own body.

In a daze he saw the turn coming. He tried to pull back on the reins, but the stallion fought him, twisting his neck like a whip until the rope reins burned in Wade's hands.

The shed jerked by again and when the stallion slowed to make the turn, Wade flung the reins over his neck and swung off. Their speed jolted him off his feet and he struck the ground with a sickening jar than sent him rolling to a stop. The stallion's body loomed enormous above him, blocking the sky, and then was gone.

For what seemed like a long time he lay on his back and stared at the wheeling trees, lost in the sky's soft gray depths that seemed so close he could have reached up and pulled it over him like a blanket. His head hurt; he became slowly aware of the cold seeping into his clothing, of his back and legs pressed against the hard ground and his elbows digging in the weeds that raised up around him like stiff sentries. Every muscle in his body seemed to have been wrenched or torn. Someone was shouting from very far away.

Wade sat up unsteadily and saw the stallion slowing at last halfway down the fenceline, carrying his head to one side so that he wouldn't step on the reins. The horse turned and stopped, his hide darker at the flanks and neck where sweat showed, and Wade could see his legs trembling slightly, the whole body trembling as if loosed from the grip of whatever had possessed him. Wade felt his arms shaking and knew he had felt it, too, blasting like a strong wind that left you numb and gasping afterward.

"You, Wade! I told you to stay off that horse!"

Harris came at a shuffling run across the pasture, his heavy

boots crashing through the grass. Wade stood up, staggered a little, rubbing his shoulder where he had struck a rock.

He watched Harris trying to catch the horse, but the stallion did not want to be caught. He was breathing heavily, nostrils flaring full and red and his ribs laboring to suck in enough air. Ears flat along his head, he averted his face and dodged Harris, keeping one eye on the man all the time.

Harris gave up and turned on the boy.

"I told you not to ride him. He could have killed you. Now get on home. Go on, get on home where you belong."

Wade stared at the other's blotched, perspiring face. He was not afraid now and didn't understand what Harris was saying. He walked slowly toward the stallion.

"I'll catch him for you."

"You won't do a Goddamn thing!" Harris shouted. "Didn't you hear me? I said get on home. Go on. And don't come around here again, you understand?"

But he still didn't, even when Harris had turned his back on him and started for the stallion. He thought Harris didn't want the responsibility of his getting hurt, and he called out, "No, it's all right," and then stopped. Wade glanced around him as if expecting help from somewhere and found nothing but the deep quiet of the farm, a quiet so complete it seemed to be sinking without protest into a dissolution it could not avoid.

"But why?" Wade asked. "Why?"

Harris didn't look at him, the broad flesh of his neck and back

seeming to protect him from all questions. The stallion did not move away now, but the quiet alertness of him kept Harris from taking the reins. The horse snorted and Harris backed off quickly.

"Mr. Harris--"

The man whirled. "Goddamn it, I ain't telling you again. Get off this property."

Wade backed away from the ugly fear in the man's eyes, and then left, looking back to see the stallion walking toward the shed and Harris following at a safe distance.

His feet found the right path in the woods, and he went blindly, driven only by a desire to get away as if from something unclean.

It wasn't until a small flock of sparrows burst out of the trees ahead of him that he heard Redquist and two others coming. Ralph was with him, and behind the two, Block ambled passively, watching Jerry wrestling with the smaller boy, his heavy eyes indolent, indifferent.

Wade did not know what made him stand quietly in the middle of the path, waiting for the three of them, seeing the slow smile on Jerry's face, the assurance and smugness there like a slick, white mask. He felt anger like a great heat poured into his blood until it blotted out hearing, reason, rage like an animal rearing its head, snarling, trying to tear its way out.

He lunged toward them, not thinking that to fight one he would have to fight all of them, not planning how he would do it, just charging into Ralph and knocking him against Jerry, and the three of them rolling, fighting on the cold ground. Wade felt the rage and hate like a sob in his throat nothing would ease, not even the solid, painful

blows he landed on someone's face and body, nor the hands reaching out for him.

Suddenly he tore loose, running to get away, to get out of the woods into clean, open air. The dense underbrush seemed to part for him as he ran further and further away from the farm, from the three boys who tried to follow him but were soon left so far behind he couldn't even hear them crashing through the brittle thickets and the leaves that patterned the hard ground.

He didn't stop running until he reached Harris's empty corn field. He was sobbing for breath, the saliva thick as rope in his mouth. Wade spat it out, trying to quiet the harsh, frightening leap of his ribs pumping the cold air through his lungs. He looked back at the woods, but nothing moved. Still, he didn't want to stay where he was, and he forced himself to move again, stumbling as he walked, half-ran sometimes, toward the highway and home.

At supper that night his mother felt his forehead and face, frowning at his lack of appetite.

"Are you feeling all right, Wade?"

"Yes," he said mechanically.

"You don't look right. Don't you think he looks sick, Rob?"

"Hmmm?" His father looked up from the letter he was reading. "A little pale, that's all. Eric and Jim may come out sometime in January. Wonder what they want?"

"It feels like he has a fever."

Rob looked at him more carefully this time. "Give him some of that vitamin C on the drainboard; it's in that green bottle." He flipped

through the letter. "It doesn't say why they want to come out."

Kay turned to look at him, the vitamin bottle in her hand.

"Couldn't it be that they just want to see us? Just want to get together? They haven't even seen Wade, or Chuck since he was born."

Rob shook his head slowly.

"No, this goes back a long time. They want something." He rubbed his chin slowly. "From what they say about some investment, I think they want me to sell the land."

Kay gave a pill and a glass of water to Wade, and he took them without protest. He noticed his mother's face had a peculiar look about it, alert, transfixed as if suddenly offered a way to attain what had almost been relinquished, given up as hopeless.

"Go on up to bed, Wade. I'll be there in a minute."

He undressed slowly in his room, listening to the voices muted by walls downstairs, his mother's voice a low murmur, placating, testing, and his father's not as firm as before but still putting her off, still bound with what had been half of his life.

Wade caught his reflection in the mirror above his dresser. It wasn't really a reflection, but another person whose longish hair looked very dark against a thin, white face and whose eyes seemed too large, too deep to be his own, filled with an unaccountable wildness.

He got into bed, and after awhile heard his mother come up, and then her weight on the bed beside him. He could smell the lilac powder she used and the soap on her hands from dish-washing.

"Is there something wrong, Wade? What is it?"

"No, nothing." He waited through her silence, waited until she brushed his forehead lightly and left, closing the door. He buried his

face against the pillow, then looked out at the dark room. Somehow it was always worse in the dark, no matter what you were thinking, always sadder.

He turned over on his side, and then before he could stop, began to cry, muffling the sounds so that they wouldn't hear him. But it didn't last long, and soon he was staring out at the darkness again, wondering if he was feeling now what Chuck had felt that night years ago. His chest felt funny, tight and painful. Was that what love was like?

I'll go back and ask Harris if I can't come again, he thought. He'll let me, he's got to let me. The ache that was there would not go away. Maybe he was really sick.

Everything felt funny, as if the anger had burned out what had been there before, and what was left was like the implacable wildness he had seen in the stallion, in that other world created around him like an impenetrable shadow, forms half-seen, half-guessed, unapproachable and dangerous. But he would get him back. The desire burned like a clean, concentrated flame. It would be his battle, because the stallion trusted and depended on him, because he had not yet learned what he wanted to learn.

CHAPTER V

It was snowing lightly when he set out for the farm.

The soft, muffled ground hid the noise of his boots as he broke through to the clearing, crouching near the fence behind a cover of tall, hollow reeds that would hide him from Harris. Snowflakes, huge and feathery, fell around him with a faint hissing and gave the air a metallic odor. He could feel them settling in his hair and falling down his back like drops of ice water. Through the reeds Wade could see the front door swing slowly back and forth over the porch. A thin thread of smoke drifted up from the chimney, rolled down the patched, shingled roof, leaving a gray smear, and then trailed to nothing.

Wade stood up slowly, torn between the desire to run and to stay, at last standing straight and still looking at the empty pasture. The clouds had thinned and wan, cold sunlight stroked every branch with its weak rays. Snow still fell as if the clouds were dissolving. The stallion was gone.

Wade started to call out, then ducked under the fence and half-ran toward the house, pounding on the front door when he got there. No one answered.

He ran to the side and rubbed one window clear. There was nothing inside but a room so coated with dust it seemed older than the farm itself. Blankets were piled in one corner, the other corner taken up by an unmade bed, a bureau whose drawers were missing and a cracked mirror perched on top.

"Mr. Harris!" Wade shouted.

The dairy cattle hunched miserably by the barn turned at the sound, staring not with curiosity or interest, moving only as a reflex to a sound that disturbed the quiet.

"Harris!"

His voice seemed swallowed in the snow, not a trace, not an echo left.

He walked back to the fence, and turned to look at the farm. Without the stallion, its one redemption, he suddenly realized how ugly it was. A gust of wind tore a scrap of paper out of the shed. It caught on a dead branch, broke loose, then became trapped in the tall, dry weeds. Wade could see other pieces of newspaper scattered around the shed as though deserting it.

How could he have thought the stallion would be here in the middle of all that dying? Harris belonged here.

Wade went back through the woods, snorting at the snowflakes that were still falling through the sun that glinted like fire off white shrubs and trees. His boots thudded on the ground and kicked up leaves and pebbles, flinging them over the snow. He felt his legs stride effortlessly, drumming a rhythm in his brain, quickening to launch him over a fallen log, striking the ground on the other side with hardly a jar.

His left hand hugged close to him as if holding a pair of reins, and he saw himself like the stallion, nostrils sucking in the wind, the wildness around him, drinking it to feed the power that carried him over the ground without seeming to touch it.

A bush rose in his path, and he leaped, scraping the top branches and sending a shower of snow bursting around him. He landed, bucking and sidestepping as though fighting himself, as though man and horse had merged within him like the flux of a primitive myth; then he straightened out again and broke into a run. Everything seemed to vanish as he passed it, to drop back into the same darkness it had been in before the boy had come.

He was running hot now and felt the excitement of it build inside until the white silence of the forest was broken by his cry that reached the edge of the woods and stopped him at last as the highway came in sight.

Even then his feet pranced as though waiting to start again, touching the earth lightly, scarcely bending the grass.

Suddenly he stood very still, his breath forming clouds of vapor around his shoulders. He shuddered as the wind pushed through his clothes to his wet skin, but he waited, feeling that in some way he had not come out of the woods alone.

Something tangible was there, something that haunted the edge of the trees, stalking the ground between Wade and dark, concealing bushes, something that rolled out silent as fog and retreated again, shaping itself like waves in the air, almost but never quite touching him.

Wade stood still, terror in him battling the desire to know. It was like nothing he had ever felt; it seemed like energy, potent, invisible, radiating from the core of everything that lived or harbored life, strange and terrible as a dream. It went through him like a knife, drawing him toward it.

Wade started back into the woods and then stopped, confused. He looked around him, suddenly aware that he had forgotten something. The highway was crowded with cars leaving the electronics factory. He should have been home by now.

The boy turned back to the highway, then glanced over his shoulder at the woods. The wind, beginning to drift the snow, lifted it like a gray-white curtain blotting out all but the tops of trees, and on the highway sent it out in thin, sinuous threads across the road.

What had touched him? He felt light-headed, invulnerable as an eagle, and more and more reluctant to go home.

ii

He had passed the Hanson place when he heard the front door slam and someone come running after him. He turned to see Ralph, hair tousled as if he had just gotten up. Ralph slowed to a walk before reaching Wade and began to kick loose stones to one of the driveways ahead of them.

"Hey, Wade, me and Jerry--we didn't make you lose that horse, did we?"

Wade said nothing, and Ralph fell in step, still not looking up at his face.

"We went to see him, the horse, I mean. He sure was big. Harris didn't take him away on account of us, did he?"

"No," Wade said.

Ralph took a short run and punted a larger stone down the road. He watched it bounce and skip across the flat highway between two wheels

of an oncoming truck.

"I told Jerry I wasn't hanging around the gang anymore--who wants to stick with those sreeeps anyway? All Redquist thinks about is beer and girls."

"How did you know Harris took the stallion away?"

Ralph scuffed the toe of his shoe into the hard, frozen earth beside the highway.

"I went back this morning to see if you were going to be around. I forgot you work in your Dad's place Saturdays. Harris told me he was going to sell the stallion. He told me to tell you not to come back to his place. What'd you do, Wade?"

"I rode the horse."

"What was it like? I ain't never ridden anything bigger than those ponies they had once at the drive-in. Was it like riding a race horse?" His freckles seemed to stand out on his nose as he questioned Wade eagerly. He was smaller than Wade and more volitile, a sense of adventure that led him to follow whoever he found more interesting.

Wade told him about the ride. "When I got off, I hurt all over. Harris was madder than hell, but the horse wouldn't even let him touch the reins."

"Maybe Harris doesn't want anybody knowing how fast the horse is; maybe they stole him off some track or something."

"You read too many mysteries. In the first place, he's a hunter, not a racer, and in the second place he's too old to race on a track. Besides, if he didn't want anybody riding him, not a jockey in the world could stay on."

"Well, Harris's got something to hide," Ralph countered. "Why else

would he live way back in the woods?"

"Maybe he doesn't like people coming around all the time."

"You'll see," Ralph said. "Someday they'll find a body on his place or dig up gold or something. I don't like him. He gives me the creeps. What's he keep that old hulk of machinery on the place for? Say, what you bet he's got something buried under it? Maybe he ran over somebody and don't want us finding out about it. Let's go back tomorrow and take a look. He won't be there then, either. He told me he'd be gone all week."

"Oh for cripes sake, Hanson." Wade couldn't help but think of the knife he had found and it gave him a funny feeling to think that someone might have murdered with it.

Ralph looked embarrassed and started kicking stones again.

"Well, anyway," he muttered, "Harris's got something to hide. Say, Wade, you want to stop at Mom's place and get something to eat? She'll let you have it for free. Come on, your folks won't get mad, will they? How come you didn't tell us about the horse? He was a beaut--bigger than anything I ever saw before. Sure wish I could have ridden him. If Harris doesn't sell him and he comes back, could I go with you? I could help with brushing him and all. Would you get me in with Harris, too?"

"You don't know the back end of a horse from the front. Trucks, that's all you can think about. Besides, I don't think the stallion is ever going to come back."

"How do you know?"

Wade didn't answer. Gloom had settled over him. Sell him--who

would be able to master the power he had felt exploding beneath him? Wade's hands curled unconsciously as if still gripping the reins.

"Okay, let's find another one, then," Ralph said. "There must be lots of horses around here. Where do they get 'em all for those horse shows and things? Say, wouldn't it be great to own one--you could ride it whenever you wanted."

Wade nodded automatically, but it didn't seem right. Ownership wasn't possible with a horse like that. Before Wade could even begin to think about riding him again he would have to better himself in some way, be stronger inside, less afraid.

The diner was getting crowded when the two boys walked in. Ralph's mother was taking orders shouted in to her by two other waitresses who looked hot and tired. A long counter with bar stools lined the far wall where a grill sent its thin blue smoke up the ventilator shaft, and the sound of frying was a constant, crackling undercurrent to the heavy voices of the truckers.

Alvina was a short, slender woman with long auburn hair done up in a twist and a face that always looked pinched to Wade, even when she smiled. Her eyes were a cloudy blue, weak and usually red-rimmed from the smoke at the grill. She and Ralph had always gotten along well; she had told Wade that Ralph would go on to college and make her a lot of money so she could retire. Her nervous energy was like his mother's, but Alvina had ulcer trouble. She said it was worrying over "the damned diner and the damned help" that had done it.

It was strange to hear a woman swear. His mother never did. The words seemed to crackle out of Alvina, and after awhile he stopped noticing them and even found himself slipping in a damn or hell when

he wasn't thinking about it. Alvina had told him not to let his folks catch him saying those words. She didn't like it either and would give Ralph a slap on the head whenever she caught him using them.

Sometimes Wade envied Ralph, being the only one in his family besides his mother. It must be easier growing up that way. Ralph seemed to have turned out all right.

Ralph pulled him over to a booth near the truck drivers. One of them was telling the others how his brakes had failed in the West Virginia mountains.

"Hell, I geared down so damned much I thought my arm was going to fall off. Every time I hit a patch of ice, I just sort of stopped breathing--there's a good five hundred feet to the bottom in some of those places."

"You mean they don't clear the roads off?" another asked, leaning forward on both elbows.

"Hell no. Two inches of snow and the whole state shuts down. The sons of bitches leave the ice there until it melts off in spring. Christ. Anyway, there I was barreling down that road. It twists around like a girlie's hair, and narrow--listen it's like driving on a silk thread. Missed two cars and a semi by about a foot--scared hell out of 'em," he laughed. His face, naturally pale, made his eyes look as if he had rubbed them with gray dust. "I could feel that load pushing behind me and starting to wag back and forth. If I'd taken any one of those turns a little too fast--jackknife, and brother, that's all she wrote. They would have had to dig me out with a spatula. Double load? Naw, but she was loaded up tight as a drum. The boss

has gotten real jumpy about schedules--rides hell out of us. Anyway I come down the last turn, and I sees straight road down below me and I'm thinking, 'Saunders, you're going to collect your pay after all,' when I hit this patch of ice and the whole shebang starts to go--man, that's a bad feeling." He shoveled in a mess of fried potatoes while the men around him waited, the smoke from their cigarettes curling back toward Wade. He would carry the smell for along time afterward. He liked the strong, dry tobacco. It was getting dark outside, and the diesel trucks were like huge beasts asleep in the snow.

"So," Saunders wiped his hand across his mouth, "I tried to turn with her, get her straightened out before that last turn run out on me. Well, I took a eight-foot section of guard rail out and three, four bushes and managed to get her back on the road, only I wasn't on it real good and right in front of me comes this Goddamn telephone pole. Let it all loose, I says to myself. Hell, I couldn't do nothing but smack right into it, sent it half-way down the mountain. A piece of it came throught the windshield, smashed glass all to hell, and sank into the seat beside me just like a knife somebody'd thrown. I still got the mark. Been sewed up but you can see it plain as a road map. I got the truck stopped, oh, about three miles on, and this cop car comes flagging me down. Seems I'd knocked the power down for part of the valley. Well, I wasn't seeing or hearing too good just then so I smiles and says, 'Yes, sir,' and he asks me to step back to the cop car so he can call in the accident and all. I couldn't get out of the cab," he said and laughed.

"Scared you that much, huh?" the man next to him asked.

"Scared, hell." He lowered his voice and glanced at the waitresses who were at the other end of the counter. A slight flush tinged his cheekbones and he grinned wickedly. "I peed in my pants."

Their laughter was like a sudden blast of sound, but to Wade after the silence in the woods everything was too loud, too close, even his own voice laughing with the men. He glanced at Ralph who had thrown one hand over the back of the booth: he was at home here.

The dinner rush passed, and the truckers left. Alvina came over to where Ralph and Wade were sitting.

"Glad to see your face in here, Wade. I told Ralph that Redquist bum was no good." She roughed her son's hair. "I thought I told you to get a haircut. You look like a bum. Well, what do you want? I got breaded tenderloin on special today."

Ralph wrinkled his nose.

"We'll have hamburgers. And a couple of cokes."

"Hamburgers. Is that any way to eat? You'll have tenderloins and cole slaw, and I'll have Joanne fix up two shakes. Now where the hell did that girl go? Every time I turn my back she runs for the john."

Ralph laughed, watching her walk away. "You should hear her when I start griping about the food in front of customers. She says I got to start working in the place pretty soon. Maybe I'll start driving trucks. Mom would hate it if she knew that."

"Hey, Ralph," Wade said slowly, tracing the aimless pattern of the green formica table top.

"What?"

"Why do you think that guy told everybody about his truck--how scared he was? I'd think he'd want to keep it to himself."

"I don't know. I heard one of them say if they didn't tell somebody, that they'd dream about it or go nuts thinking what could have happened. I think it's funny, especially when Saunders tells it. He's had lots of close calls. One time he was so hopped up on bennis--"

"On what?"

"Bennis--benzedrine," Ralph said. "Pills they take to stay up all night. Anyway, he was so high on them that he drove clear out of Chicago, side-swiped a power pole and stopped in the next town without remembering a thing about it. Weird, huh?" Saunders says the guys who have the rough jobs are the ones who haul dynamite through the Rockies. They make a mint, though, sometimes ten bucks an hour. Just think, one little slip and, Blowie! They'd have to scrape you off the road with a shovel. Saunders says the guys who drive those kinds of trucks are scared all the time, and sometimes they'll bring a load in and just walk out on the job. He says when you lose your nerve you got to quit, or you'll end up dead. I'd like to try it, though. Make a lot of money and then get the hell out. What about you, Wade?"

Wade shrugged. "Dad keeps saying I've got to start thinking about some kind of job. He says we've all got to kick in some money--it's like being in a business or something. Mom doesn't care what I do so long as I like it. Oh, and so long as it contributes something to other people. She's always working on projects and stuff."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

Wade shifted uneasily and looked out the window where the traffic

had cleared.

"Maybe raise horses," he said. "I don't know. Maybe I won't do anything--or maybe I'll do something really crazy."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Jeffers thinks I'll make a good chemist, like Chuck. At least he says I spell as bad as Chuck did."

He wondered even as he was speaking what made it so hard to say what he was really thinking, space and subdued, intense excitement of being alone in the woods, of being with the stallion. Wade could feel it even now pressing inside him. He wondered why Ralph didn't feel it, too.

Had he been born without something, or maybe with something other people didn't have? Maybe his parents weren't really his parents, maybe he had come from somewhere beyond earth. How strange that would be, a world with a whole different race of men, and one where animals, no matter how wild, recognized men as one of them, in fact of all the animals, man was the wildest. Had he seen a world like that? Maybe in a movie somewhere. Why did it seem so familiar? He saw the stallion's eyes, fierce and indomitable, proud of his strength, proud even of his age. Not to be afraid.

"Hey, Wade, you going to stare it down or eat it?" Alvina asked. "Take your plates back to the dishwasher when you get through. I got customers to look after."

"Here comes Pat Buckner," Ralph said.

A tall, dark-haired man wearing a mechanic's greased-stained jacket walked in, flinging the door open until it banged against the

freezer. He exuded a formidable cheerfulness.

"I think he wants to marry Mom. She says he's a bum like Dad was."

"What do you think?" Wade asked.

Ralph shrugged and tried sucking his chocolate shake through his straw. It collapsed, and he drank it straight from the glass, leaving a chocolate moustache on his lip. "He's okay, I guess. I don't really care. I'll be leaving when I'm sixteen anyway, so I guess it doesn't make much difference who she marries."

"How's my girl?" Pat sang out. He wrapped his legs around the counter stool and glanced at the juke box in one corner of the room.

"What's with you?" they heard Alvina say. She leaned on the counter across from him. "You got around that blond yet?"

"Blond? What blond? Red, you know there ain't no blond. Come on, how about a little music? Here," he fished a dime out of his pocket. "Pick out a tune. It's too quiet in here."

"All right. Hey, Joanne--get this joker some coffee!" She went around the end of the counter. Pat scooped up a newspaper and wacked her across the bottom. Wade saw her glance back at him with a smile that different, something in it young and inviting, and he thought of his mother smiling the same way when his father grabbed at her. He looked at Pat. There was an eagerness in the man's face, almost, Wade thought, a hunger. Pat turned and winked at the boy.

Wade flushed slightly and turned away, the tension inside making it hard to swallow the tenderloin. Pat's eyes had been open, friendly, but Wade felt that his own had stared back at the man with the flat,

almost malevolent indifference of a wild animal. He did not want to understand.

The juke box started up with a bluegrass song where the steel guitar wailed out like the voice of a square dance caller. Pat flung his hat and coat on the counter and grabbed Alvina. They started a mock square dance in the small space by the juke box while the waitresses and two other customers looked on, grinning and tapping out the rhythm.

Wade picked up his plate and shouted to Ralph, "Come on, let's go."

They stepped out into the cold, the door shutting off the juke box. Wade hugged his jacket tighter and with an odd, bright smile side-stepped like a colt down the road with Ralph panting to keep up.

"Hey, you crazy? I can't run after I eat. I get sick."

Wade laughed, slowing down, dancing around Ralph, leaping away when the other boy tried to grab hold of him, keeping always out of reach of something that seemed a threat even in Ralph's harmless, outstretched hand.

CHAPTER VI

Monday after school Wade's English teacher called him into his office. Jeffers' door was one of several in a long, narrow corridor that was poorly lighted and smelled of anitseptic from the nurse's office down the hall. The door was locked and Jeffers had to open it from the inside. He was a tall, stooped man with dark hair and eyes and a deeply resonant voice that seemed to echo inside his chest. He could bring to life the things he loved, books, stories, the lives of writers, but he seemed to speak with a hidden sadness, something deep inside him that Wade felt he would never reveal.

The man pushed out a chair for Wade to sit in, and the boy balanced himself on the edge of it, hands clenched in his pockets. Jeffers picked up his grade book, glanced at it, then threw it back on the desk. His chair creaked as he leaned back, fixing his gaze on Wade.

"You haven't been doing too well in the last four weeks. In fact you haven't had a grade above a D on a single report you've written."

Wade said nothing, staring at Jeffers' shoes which were an old brown with scuff marks worn deeply into them as if he had walked a long way. Any firm accusation convinced the boy of his guilt, but it was more than that, it was being in Jeffers' office that made a difference, too. They had you at an advantage then.

"I thought about sending your parents a letter or asking them to

stop by some afternoon, but I don't want to do that just yet."

Wade felt a surge of relief.

"I want you to understand, Wade, that what you do now is going to have its consequences later on, although you may not see it that way just yet. You've got one of the highest potentials in the class. I'd like to see you get into the advanced sections in high school, but that means you've got to get your mind on your work."

"Yes, sir," Wade said quietly.

Jeffers was silent for a moment, clicking the point of his pen, in and out, as if absorbed in the monotonous sound.

"There's so much you've got to learn, you've got to know--" he stopped, not looking at Wade. "It's...well, you can't say it's getting any easier. College, other degrees--you've got to have so much before you can start out on your own."

"That's what Dad says. He says Chuck's got to get his Ph.D."

"Your brother seems to be on his way. Can he spell any better?"

"No," Wade smiled.

Another silence fell, the pen clicking like a clock in its steady ticks.

"It's just--you see, Wade, it's important to do the best you can, do it now. I'd hate to see you miss out on some of the really good courses and teachers you could have. Have you thought about what you'd like to work toward, what you'd like to be?"

"Maybe work in chemistry like Chuck," Wade said, just to be saying something, but he felt in the words an oppressive sense of the future.

"Yes, that sounds practical. You've got a good head for science."

I hear they're working on an advanced science course for this summer-- it would run about three weeks. If you want to get in that, you're going to have to do something about these English grades. After all, science, chemistry, that isn't going to help you when you have to write up a report or give a presentation. I think a little extra help might do the trick. Let's say half an hour after school every day. I'll call your parents and let them know. All right?"

"Yes, sir," Wade said. He could not get the right note of repentance or appreciation in his voice. He seemed to be staring at Jeffers from behind a stiff mask.

His head ached with all the spelling words and grammar rules Jeffers had given him to memorize when he finally left the school. He watched as a car drove up to the end of the sidewalk and three younger children got into it. They pushed each other, laughing, snatching papers out of each other's hands, one paper getting free and blowing end over end across the brown school lawn. The car doors slammed and they drove away. The paper seemed to realize it was lost, fluttered undecidedly for a moment on the ground, then circled back toward the street. It caught on the flag pole, and after awhile the wind began to tear it, fraying one side like a rag.

The school grounds were deserted. He looked at the dull red buildings and paved playground in back of them, and the wide, grassy field that had once been part of a farm. It all seemed to belong to something outside him now. Was he lost, then? He seemed to have fallen into another existence filled with uncertainty and pain.

From where he stood he could barely see Harris's woods, a dark smear

in the distance. He always hurt inside whenever he thought about the stallion; it was like living the same day over and over again when he didn't want to get up. There was always the loss. But what to do about it.

It was nearly sunset now, lights piercing the darkness along the highway, and the cold seemed to invade every part of him. Still he didn't move for a long time, staring at the jagged edge of trees showing just above the houses.

ii

"Half an hour after school?" his father said. "Do you think that's enough?"

Wade pulled at the covered buttons on the couch. His father sat in a large arm chair, the newspaper spread over him. Outside the wind was rushing past the house, pushing against it until the walls snapped with cold.

Wade's mother had told Rob about the phone call Jeffers had made, told him, Wade thought, not with vindication or a desire to pin either of them down, but out of genuine concern with what she saw as a problem. She was good at problems. But their efforts to make him feel the gravity of the situation misfired. It all seemed exaggerated to the boy, as if everything were being blown out of proportion, everyone pretending to care about grades and school and the future while in reality no one knew the reasons behind anything they did.

"Don't you think you'd better spend some time on your own?" his father asked. The light from the lamp cut his lean face into hard,

angular planes. Wade thought about the tree's ridges, the ones that had seemed so deep and infinite. He wondered why most shadows seemed to stop at the surface and express nothing more than a sinking curve or angle, to hold no mystery and to reveal so little when chased out by light.

He remembered in the shed with the single light burning overhead how the stallion's long face was half swallowed in darkness, the eyes great round holes of darkness and lurking in them a distant flicker, a warning and a secret like the hidden glint of a knife, how it seemed everything had withdrawn into that darkness and was recreated, making him feel if he got too close he would be sucked in and would have no way to get out, trapped in that furious and potent world. Layer after layer of things hidden from him, things he would have to understand.

Sometimes he thought his own eyes looked like that, something in them he could not fathom. Maybe, he thought, the man who knows isn't alive anymore, maybe the last of his kind are gone. But I would remember him. And the stallion, he knows him, too. Was that what he had been waiting for? looking for? Something coming out of the woods. A man.

"Maybe if you spent some time Saturday mornings," his mother said. She stood in the kitchen doorway. "What do you think, Wade? You could go over your work and catch up on what you haven't done."

"I don't understand why you didn't do anything before this," his father said. "You must have known about your grades. Didn't you get your papers back?"

"Yes." But they had meant less to him graded than they had meant

to him when he was writing them.

"Then why didn't you see Jeffers or ask your mother or me for help?"

"I guess I didn't think about it."

"You didn't think about it." His father sighed and rattled the newspaper, creasing it back along the edge. Wade thought that under the circumstances his father was taking it rather calmly. He hadn't once mentioned the stallion. "If that's the way you want it, lad. You're just going to have to do twice the work to make it up."

"Why don't you set up a schedule, Wade?" his mother asked. "You can work on your themes for an hour or so on Saturday."

His father put down the paper.

"Wade, dammit, you're getting too old for this kind of thing to keep happening. You know by now that's not the way to get through school, that you've got to accept more and more responsibility for yourself. We aren't going to follow you around and tell you to do this and tell you to do that. Just like we don't follow Chuck around. He's accepted the responsibilities of earning a living, getting the qualifications he'll need for it. You're going to have to make your way pretty soon. You've got a good mind, start using it. I don't want you to end up like--well, complaining about all the boats that missed you and blaming us for letting you drift until it was too late. Or like Harris, you want to end up with something like that? Everything you do now will determine how you act later on, whether you can stick with a job or quit. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Wade said, and then, "Do I have to do it every Sat-

urday, Dad? Couldn't it be every other Saturday?"

His father glanced at him, then turned back to his paper.

"Ed Berkley was in today. He said Harris sold his stallion to some gentleman farmer in Woodstock. He's going to ride him to hunt, Ed told me." He looked at Wade. "Did Harris tell you?"

"No. Who was the farmer? Did he say?"

"No, didn't give me a name."

"What if he can't ride him, Dad? What will happen then?"

"What do you think?" his father said, staring directly at him as he always did when making Wade face a fact.

Wade did not like to think about it. He could imagine the farmer trying to force the stallion over a jump, the stallion refusing, maybe even throwing him and then another sale or maybe they would ship him to the Chicago stockyards.

"There wouldn't be any place they could keep him," Wade said.

"Bright boy."

"But why, Dad? Why can't they just leave him alone?"

"While he's eating up approximately \$20 a day in feed and care. It's out of your hands now, Wade. The question is, are you going to look for another horse? Do you still want one?"

"I don't know. It wouldn't be the same unless it was like the stallion."

"There you go again, always setting your heart on what you can't have when you could get something just as good by looking around. Find out how much it would cost to keep one, work for it. I told you that

land of ours is still good pasturage. I'd almost be willing to take a loss for a couple of years to get your head out of the clouds and thinking about something solid. Do you think I made it through school wishing? Look, Wade, you can't always get what you want, but you-- there are a lot of times you don't get it because you don't want it badly enough."

"But why would they have to kill him, Dad?"

Rob folded the paper slowly.

"Well, from what you've told me and Ed Berkley has said, the horse is too wild to manage. Sure, when there was enough space left wild horses were turned loose and they could go where they pleased. But now, well, now they've got to live with us. If they can't pull their weight, give a little in return for all the money and care we put into them, then they aren't any use. It's too bad, but that's the way it is."

"Couldn't they just...well, look at him or be friends with him or something? He wouldn't have to be a work horse, not with all the machines around."

Rob laughed. "That's a damned expensive way to find a friend. Look, Wade, let me put it this way. There's a head-on collision between what's wild and what's tame, and when one of them starts spreading out, something has to lose. Understand?"

"And what's wild is...expendible?"

"Well, that's a fifteen-dollar way to put it, but yes, I would say so. It's too bad, but it happens."

His mother interrupted from the kitchen. "I almost forgot, a letter came from Eric today," she said. "They may not be able to make

it after all. He may give you a call sometime this week."

"Did he say what about?"

"No, just that it was important."

"First time in six years he's called about something important. You can bet your last bottle of wine it's going to cost us money."

"Oh, also, Rob, would you talk to some of the men who come in about the school auditorium? A lot of them can't see the use of it and we need one so badly. This is the third time the issue has come up. Could you do a little campaigning?"

"Sure, sure," Rob said, looking over a thick sheaf of invoices. "You should see the quality of oak we're getting now--hardly worth the money it'd take to turn it all into toothpicks. Rain got to it before they had it processed and some of it warped. I've never seen such a damned mess."

"Two more new schools to build in the next five years. Where is all the room going to come from? I was talking to Bill Rymer. He said they are going to be starting five hundred new freshmen at the high school next year--in this town alone. There just isn't enough room."

"Hmmm."

"Rev. Dodge was saying that he wants you to take over the membership drive again this year. It seems like it's the same people who get the work done. He said you did such a good job getting people out last year. We still haven't got that church budget balanced yet. We need twelve thousand dollars, and no one knows where it's coming from... unless you take over the fund drive."

Wade could see his father, the hard voice beating down protests,

beating down excuses until a man was forced to give in or throw away the name of Christian and Methodist and join another church or excommunicate himself altogether. As much as they might privately curse the collector, the church members would see that the money came in. Wade had to smile. Nothing for free, nothing without a price.

His mother started talking about the church again and Wade slipped upstairs. Chuck was gone again, and the upstairs seemed emptier, more silent.

Books were piled in neat stacks on his desk. He had arranged them in the order he would start studying, Understanding Language first. The picture of wild ducks barely showed behind them. Sometimes in the spring or early fall he would be lucky enough to hear them passing, the thin, silvery honking like a cascade of distinct, bell-like cries. He didn't hear them much anymore. He had always thought of the ducks coming from mountain areas with the blue imprint of lakes at the foot of a towering summit, surrounded, of course, by black pines; and in the spring they came north from a vast stretch of sand, cooled by reeds and shallow tides where the sky was always hot and it was always afternoon.

He flopped across his bed and hung over one side, staring up at the sky. The wind was roaring in the trees, the sound like a great, wordless voice, a little frightening. It was like standing over an abyss, hearing it roar beneath you. Night was when wild things ruled.

He rolled over on his stomach and picked up the first book on desk. It was a small blue book of the Methodist catechism. He would have to start taking that, too. It felt smooth and compact in his hand.

Sometimes he liked the way books felt, especially if they were thick and covered with plastic wrap that crinkled like cellophane when he opened the covers. It was reading that was hard. Sometimes it made him feel cold and machine-like inside, especially when the authors talked about things he didn't understand. Like the catechism. He leafed idly through the pages.

Q.-Who is Our Savior and Lord? A.-Jesus Christ, Son of God.

Q.-Why did Christ die on the Cross?

Q.-What is a good age at which to begin dating?

Q.-What is fornication?

Q.-Is it possible to lead a perfect life as our Father in Heaven?

He let the book drop. Like everything else it seemed somehow beside the point. Did God really care? He imagined a house where the walls were lined with books like Rev. Dodge's study, and all the ministers argued about what to put in and what to leave out of the catechism. What if God or Christ were to come in then, or say, someone had invited them to his house and left them alone in the study for awhile where all the books on religion were, all the books ever written by anybody about being Christian.

He could see God take one of them down and open it, read awhile, and then begin to chuckle, shaking his head. Jesus would want to read it, and then he'd laugh, too, and take down another book. By the time their host had returned, he would find the both of them roaring with laughter, books stacked around their chairs, beating on their knees while trying to read to each other from their books. Great shouts of laughter, tears glistening in their eyes; Wade had to laugh himself just thinking about it.

Had God laughed last year, he wondered, when the catechism class had sung at confirmation, "I come to Jesus Just as I Am," and three of them had fainted like white starch napkins folding up? It had seemed funny then.

He thought of himself sitting with his mother and father in the blond pew, listening to the sermon which he liked because you didn't have to get up and sit down for almost twenty minutes.

He liked Sunday afternoons, especially when it was warm. He would stretch out on the living room rug where the sun warmed it, and lie in the square patch of sunlight. All his muscles would go limp, and he would close his eyes, listening to his mother whistle in tune with something on the radio. She had a beautiful whistle, so rich and clear that it seemed to reach deep inside him.

He saw the sun red under his eyelids and felt the floor press against his body. Warmth flooded his back and legs; he dug his fingers into the rug and floated on a luxurious and sensual lethargy, a weakness creeping into the small of his back and pleasure so thick in his throat that his tongue curled back, pressing against his mouth.

He had loved those afternoons, something in them slow and quiet as if straightening out inside what had gotten mixed up during the week. But now it all seemed to be getting away from him somehow, closing like a door, and he did not know how to get it open again. Ever since the stallion, it had all been different. He could not imagine himself feeling that calm again.

Wade let one arm hang over the bed, swinging the catechism book back and forth along the floor. His other arm was curled under him,

where he could feel his heart beating slowly, pushing on his wrist.

What would it be like to start out not knowing religion, never going to church, or reading the Bible, or ever hearing except maybe now and then about Gospel love or the Golden Rule, none of that? What if there was nothing to stop a man from doing what he wanted--what would that man be like? A single rider, outside other people who lived by churches and jails, schools, shopping centers, moving on, saying 'No' to towns and what they brought, looking for something that maybe wasn't there or that had been there and been farmed out, preached out, paved out. What would he believe having rejected or simply not learned religion?

He tried to imagine what he would look like, a man who could understand the sorrel stallion, having nothing to do with those settled not because he didn't want to, but because they were going in different directions; the town people toward more schools, more streets, putting walls between themselves and the sound of someone leaving, an old distrust of the wanderer; and the horseman going another way, toward the emptiness between towns, given in place of the desire to settle, a knowledge of death.

The book slipped out of his hand and scooted under the bed. Wade wriggled like a fish until his head was touching the floor, and he could see under the bed clear back to the wall. The book was just beyond arm's reach. Wade inched a little farther down, and then felt himself sliding. He grabbed frantically at the bedspread, but the quilt went with him, and he turned a half summersault, knocking over his chair and landing with a loud thump.

"What was that?" his mother called up the stairs.

"I fell off the bed," he called back, setting his chair upright.

"How on earth did you do that?"

"I just kinda...fell off."

Nothing more from his mother.

It was strange, he thought, how he seemed to be different ages all the time. When he was alone he felt older, more independent, but the minute his mother or father started talking to him he felt not even his own age but younger.

The book was beside a small box coated with dust. Wade didn't remember putting it there. Puzzled, he pulled it out and dusted the lid carefully, reading "Keats Shoes--Oxford Br." He opened it and found that it was filled with things he had meant to throw away--a braided loop with a whistle on the end, three gyroes without strings, a lot of broken pencils and some envelopes, postcards. He dug to the bottom and stopped, staring at what lay beneath a crumpled postcard from New York. It was the knife he had found in Harris's woods.

Wade took the knife out. The sheath was dark brown and badly stained. A strap still in good condition snapped around the handle of the knife, keeping it tight against the stiff leather. Part of the stitching around the sheath's edge was gone.

He felt a sense of warning that he ought to leave it alone, as though if he were to pull the handle up there would be no blade but something sinister, even, perhaps, lethal unleashed. But it fit his hand so well.

He pushed against the snap, then pulled the knife out. The handle

was tipped with a metal end, the rest was bone, discolored to a smoke brown and grooved for better gripping. The blade came out slowly, curving in a graceful arc to the tip with a guard flaring between the steel and the end of the handle. Wade's hand fitted perfectly, his thumb and first finger resting on the guard.

He held the blade up to the light. It had rusted very little, and the steel gleamed like dull silver, the point like an axis around which the rest of the knife turned. It seemed to point at the heart of all of them in the house, not in threat, but there, an inescapable fact. He tested the blade by drawing it up his fingernail. He could sharpen it on his father's whetstone.

"Wade!" his father called.

He put the knife away and shoved the box far under the bed. Later he would move it to a safer place. His mother would not like him having it.

"Yes, sir?" he said from the top of the stairs.

His father would seldom answer questions shouted from a distance, and after listening to himself breathe for a moment, Wade went downstairs where he found his father putting blue slips of paper into envelopes. His mother was on the couch writing letters about the bond issue, Wade supposed.

"I want you to help get these bills out. Start with that stack there and put stamps on all of them."

Wade sat down slowly and picked up the first pile of neat white envelopes, listening to his father's running commentary.

"George Freeman, lives in the last century--old enough to remember

it, too. Karl Vlcek, stubborn as a dry cow, won't admit his roof needs reshingling. And Bill O'Keefe, got three cars, a new garage, and a power boat big enough to swamp the Enterprise--why the hell can't he pay a thirty dollar repair bill? What the hell happened here?" He compared two statements, corrected a figure and shoved the blue slip into its envelop.

It was a little like dispensing judgements, Wade thought, the harsh voice praising or damning a man solely on the basis of figures. Rev. Dodge had told their Sunday School class once that God kept a roster of good and bad marks in Heaven, and the idea was not to keep from getting bad makrs, that being impossible, but to make enough good marks to outweigh them. Wade had wondered later if people like Rev. Dodge thought all kids were stupid and would accept any story about good and evil they were told.

"Damned nuisance," his father said. "Sometimes I wonder if leaving the farm was such a smart idea. Still...I've been thinking, Wade."

Wade felt his heart start to beat faster, anticipating another lecture.

"Maybe you could combine chemistry and horses, go into horse raising, become a vet, something like that. Have you thought about it?"

Wade shook his head.

"Why not? There's Carl McKenna's place about ten, twenty miles down the highway. He's got quite a spread, doesn't own it, I think somebody called Borodine does, but he makes good money." The hands stopped and lay still over the blue papers. Wade glanced up at his father's face. Rob was staring out the dark window. "The feed wouldn't

take much the way I get it. Set up a syndication deal, talk to McKenna about it. You could go on to college, learn economics, pick up what you can about horses before then." The eyes, now sharp and direct, very blue under the kitchen light, staring at him. "Well, what about it? You want to talk to McKenna?"

Wade squirmed, looking down at his feet wrapped around the chair legs. He was afraid this would happen.

"I guess so."

"You sound like I'm dragging it out of you."

Wade said nothing.

"Rob, don't go filling his head with those ideas," his mother was suddenly in the kitchen doorway, stationery box still in one hand. "Besides, you said yourself Eric and Jim may need the money, and I don't know where else it's going to come from if it isn't that land."

"I'm just trying to suggest possibilities," his father said, "None of this is cut and dried, you know that. It's just that he ought to be thinking about these things before he tries to do anything about them."

"Your ideas or his?"

"Mother," Wade protested. He wished she would stay out of these things.

"I'm not pushing him into anything," Rob said. "I just merely suggested--"

"And I wish you'd let him make up his own mind."

"When? After the crash comes--is that when you want him to do his thinking?"

"Of course not--"

"Then let me do it my way. Like Chuck--he knew he couldn't get to college on what we made so he went out and hustled a job. All right, Wade can do the same."

"We aren't in that desperate a strait yet," his mother snapped back. Her eyes were beginning to flash, and her cheeks had a faint flush of color.

Wade sat with his two fists pushed against his face, looking at neither of them, ashamed and angry. Rob said nothing.

"I just don't think it's right," his mother said. "We were through with all that farming when we moved off the land; I don't understand why you hold onto it."

Rob was silent still. Wade looked up, forcing himself to meet his father's eyes.

"I'll talk to McKenn if I see him in the feed store."

"All right," Rob said. "If I run into him before that I'll ask about taking you to the farm or maybe the race track. It's flat racers I think he raises."

Wade looked at his mother. She said nothing, still angry and with something like fear in her eyes, vague, undetermined, like her fear of the dark or strange noises or being lost as if she could hear, not recognize it but could still hear that rider passing, afraid of what he might take with him. It was something Wade knew that suffered no appeal, not from prayer or law or human supplication.

He wondered how his father would prepare for something like that, if he would even understand should he feel it as Wade had, invading like a slow, powerful dream.

CHAPTER VII

The next three days it snowed until school was shut down while the roads were cleared.

Wade and Ralph took their sleds to the city park where a hill nearly a quarter mile long had been blocked off. It was crowded, sleds scoring the steep incline like a pattern scratched with long, wide claws, while colored ski suits and jackets spotted the lower section of the hill. Snow was heavy on the opposite slope and hung off the massive oak trees, weighing down their top branches until it seemed everything bent or broke before the cold. A loud snapping like gun shots filled the air as branches moved ponderously in the wind, scattering snow in a sudden, powdery cascade.

Clearing weather made the cold even more intense, and before long Ralph signaled to Wade, who was at the bottom of the hill and climbing up, that he wanted to go home.

"Just one more," Wade panted, the wind tearing the vapor from his breath in a long, ragged streamer. "Then we'll go, okay?"

"Okay," Ralph said unhappily. He jumped up and down to get feeling back into his toes. "But if I'm nothing but a long blue chunk of ice when you get back, I'll haunt you forever. Jesus, it's cold. Well--hurry up!"

Wade ran to the edge of the hill, threw the sled down and leaped on top of it as it dipped over the crest and hurled downward, gaining speed on the hard-packed snow. He braced himself against the steering

bar, threading his way through packs of slower sleds and children working their way toward the top. The cold brought tears to his eyes; his parka hood jerked off, the wind battered at his ears, shrieking into them until his head ached as though something were pressing from inside his skull. He pulled at the sled rope like reins. The sled hit a rough spot in the snow, and its runners smacked onto the hard surface with stunning force, lifted off, seemed to twist in mid-air, and landed at a crazy tilt.

Wade hung on, working his toes like rudders to get the sled straightened out again, and it finally glided to a stop, leaving long, deep gouges in the snow like skid marks. He was aware of a fight going on far to the right of him; it looked like some of the boys from school, but Ralph was still dancing on top of the hill and he started climbing back up. It seemed to take forever. The wind was stronger now and much colder since the brief afternoon was gone.

"Jesus, Wade," Ralph shouted when he was close enough to hear, "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"Redquist. He smacked into two kids broadside. Look at the fight! That fairy--someday some guy is going to beat his head in. Didn't you see him behind you?"

"No," Wade said, trying to pick him out in the dark tangle of boys below. Two men were running toward the fight. "I guess it's a good thing."

"Aw, it's over. Come on, Wade, let's go. I'm freezing to death."

"What did Jerry say about you quitting his gang?" Wade asked.

They wrapped their mufflers tighter around their necks and Wade fixed his parka string. It was so cold now his breath froze on the muffler, and he had to keep moving it so the ice wouldn't rub his face raw.

"Oh, nothing much," Ralph said. He knocked the snow off his sled runners, and the two of them started toward the main road running past the park. Only one lane of traffic had been cleared, and they could walk on top of the drifts, pulling the sleds behind them.

"He said something about everybody quitting once and then coming back again. He thinks I'm going to be in his stupid little gang. I told him he could shove it."

"Did you ever wonder why he's like that? I mean, why he wants to do things like start fights, run a gang to beat kids up; he even said he had a still in the wall of his bedroom."

"Yeah, I heard that."

They had come to loose snow, and it took nearly all their strength to break a trail. Wade could feel some of the snow packing down inside his boots, the cold shock of it like fire burning against his pant leg and slowly soaking to his skin. Ralph was panting next to him and had to stop to talk. The wind had rubbed his face a bright pink.

"Well," he said, "why do you think he's like that?"

"I don't know. It's funny, because sometimes you get the feeling you'd like to do some of the things he does--like the time he blew a hole in the jail."

"Yeah," Ralph grinned. "That was something. Had the sheriff going crazy. Anderson never could pin it on him."

"It's like something--well, like a storm. You can't stop it or change it, it just has to happen. Do you see, Ralph?"

"Hmmm, not really, but if you say so."

"There's something funny about things, Ralph. It's like there's a fight going on all the time and you don't see it until somebody like Redquist comes along, and then all of a sudden, you got to choose sides. You know when snow melts a little and then freezes so you can walk on it, only sometimes there's air pockets and when you hit 'em you go down like a truck hit you? Well, it's kind of that way."

"Boy, I wish it'd snow another two feet. We wouldn't have to go to school for a week!"

"The stallion was kind of like that, too."

"Oh, yeah?"

The sun which had blinded them during early afternoon now slanted through the trees and flung long spikes of shadow, collecting in pools under shrubs and beside houses. The clarity of sky gathered in the last light, a faint edge of red-orange low in the west. Even the sun looked cold.

White exhaust from cars trailed low to the street, tires squeaking in the deep snow. The windshields were iced over, only a narrow spot in the front cleared off. Cars looked blind, inching their way as if feeling ahead of them to make sure it was clear.

"Let's cut through the school lot. It's nearly a block shorter that way," Wade said. He blew on his gloved fingers. "Damn! I think my hands are going to drop off."

"What hands?" Ralph said. His teeth chattered loudly. "I already

forgot about them. It's the rest of me I'm worried about. I can see it now--ma'll find me a frozen corpse just outside the front door, reaching up for the knob. She'd probably stick me out in the snow and hang the mailbox on me. The wind knocked down the one we had."

They struggled through deeper drifts coming almost to Ralph's waist and then hit the open school field where most of the snow had been swept level by the wind. Even though the walking was easier, the wind roared down on them, sometimes making it impossible to breathe in the hard, crystal air. Wade had to tie the sled rope around his arm because his hands would no longer hold onto it. The land ahead of them was barren and white as an Arctic waste, thin sticks poking through the drifts as though trying desperately to keep the snow from covering them, to keep the sun on their dry branches. Snow shifted in long, spectral ribbons, hissing with the secrecy of fine sand and forming knife-like ridges that in the sinking light were long purple hollows like frozen waves.

A pond steamed in the distance. His father had told him that the water was freezing so fast that it gave off vapor. That meant it was about fifteen below.

Wade had forgotten how much pain there was in such cold. It attacked the feet and hands and face first, until it seemed the skin was stretched so tight that if he tapped it lightly the bone beneath would shatter like glass. He couldn't feel his knees bumping each other any more, and his feet hurt as though something were pounding them.

He couldn't get over how little it cost them to cross the field

in summer and how hard it was now. All green then, now all white, inbetween, all brown. Extremes, burning, frozen. Weather-shaped, and the people like that, too, like his father, beaten into some hard shape. All right, all wrong. Yes, sir. No, sir. His father's face hewed by frost and heat so that it was like the land, set in its expression, letting all the rest go.

A great weariness was dragging at his legs. He began to get confused as to which way was home.

"Hey, Wade, wait up." The voice was faint and small in his ear. He turned to see Ralph struggling through a three foot drift. He saw he was up to his knees in snow.

"Let's rest a little while," Ralph said, and sank into the snow.

Wade leaned into the drift. He stared dully across the distance they still had to go. Darkness was beginning to close quickly now. Lights from his street seemed far away, swimming as if underwater in the clear, bitter air.

"Come on, Ralph, let's go."

Ralph groaned and heaved himself up. The sleds seemed to have gained ten pounds. Wade stared at his feet. They shouldn't have come this way where it was unprotected from the wind. He had heard of men who were frost-bitten so badly they had to have their fingers cut off and others who had saved their hands but never had much feeling in them after that. Careless, he thought. Mistakes, even now--why, we could die, in sight of houses, lights, everything.

He stopped and heard Ralph breathing harshly behind him. They had been walking the wrong way. He would have to watch ahead of him,

not stare at his feet. The pain was much worse now; he could hardly move his fingers. Ralph was starting to whimper softly.

"Come on," Wade said harshly, "keep walking."

He was frightened now. They had to stop after every few feet, and each time it was harder to get going again. Why couldn't someone see them? Why didn't his mother know? Could she feel the pain?

Lift the feet up, he thought, keep to level ground, keep moving. Keep moving. Lift feet, keep moving. His brain made a song out of it that he hummed over and over, and soon Ralph was following in his trail. It seemed he was riding, and the sled behind him like a pack horse he led. Not to fight the cold, the snow, but yield to it, save energy and keep moving. Pain meant you were alive. Taking pain, that was being alive, too. The more you hurt, the more alive it meant you were.

The stallion carried him through the last drift when a haze of exhaustion blurred his eyes and hearing until the only sounds that penetrated were the squeak of his boots and Ralph crying close behind him.

They ran the last few yards to his house, and then the control Wade had kept over himself broke and there was no need to pretend the stallion was with him.

By the time his father came home Kay had taken Ralph to his house and poured hot chocolate down Wade. The packed snow had cut through to the skin and rubbed raw patches that bled slowly. Long white welts rose on his feet and hands, itching and burning at the same time. His fingers and toes were fiery red and swelling with the heat. It hurt more getting warm than it had getting cold.

"Here, take this." His mother held out a glass of water and a pill.

"What is it?" Wade asked.

"Vitamin C. I don't want you coming down with double pneumonia."

His father looked at his ankles and painted them with iodine.

"Thirteen," he said scornfully. "I thought you two had more sense than to walk two miles when its twenty-four below. Why the hell didn't you call your mother?"

"It didn't feel that cold at first."

"It never does."

"Boy it hurt. It was like holding ice cubes in your hands."

"Well, I should say so. Goddamn you have the luck of the Irish. Fella told me today his neighbor froze to death trying to hike into town when his car ran out of gas. I don't want you pulling another stunt like this again. You know enough about this country to stay out of the wind when it gets this cold."

"I forgot."

Rob shook his head and started looking through the mail Kay always set on the bookcase.

Wade looked down at his ankles, the raw skin getting dark and hard. It was going to make a nifty scar. He looked out the window, a shudder running deep inside him at the silent, white hills. Then he thought about the stallion. For a while Wade had felt like the rider, going not toward, but away from home, back into the death-white stillness.

"There was another letter from Eric," his mother said.

"I know," his father replied. "Three of them now, like a drowning

man. Poor damn fool." His smile was more like a grimace of pain.

Wade was surprised. He hadn't thought that his uncles meant much at all to his father.

Wade hoped if Eric was going to call it would be when he was at home. He never had seen his uncle; it would be interesting to talk to him at least. He wondered why his uncles kept failing. Would they end up like Harris? His father never would, but the boy didn't understand why exactly, what was the essential difference between them.

The boy wondered about himself, too. At times he feared the image of Harris's farm, because he saw himself there, drawn by some inexplicable destiny despite all he might do to struggle against it. Always in the end it would be there waiting for him.

Not if I want something bad enough, he thought. If I want the stallion bad enough. Spring will be here; I'll find out who owns him, has him now and find him again. I'll work for it.

His hands clenched, the pain in them like a promise.

It was a long time before they heard from Eric. The letters stopped as abruptly as they had begun, and Rob's questions to the West Coast were not answered.

"Well, it shows one thing," he said dryly, "They aren't down to their last dollar yet."

CHAPTER VIII

He did the extra hour of studying on Saturday without complaint, even found some relief in concentrating on hard, angular mathematics, and historical dates, the certainties of math and history.

Astronomy began to interest him, also, and he learned most of the constellations and major stars. Immensities. They stretched farther than he would ever be able to imagine, and he found comfort in their inaccessibility as though beyond the reach not only of himself, but all men, all time as he knew it. Alpha Centuri, nearest of the stars, roared away in space four and a half light years from the sun. The black space between them like the blackness of his room at night when he shut his eyes tightly and saw bright, flashing points of light that flared and died briefly. And the stars, flaring and dying, some in a blaze of light that would black out the stars around them for centuries, nebulae, Crab, Horsehead: some as smoldering coals, cooling, cooling until the dark core that was left finished out its cycle undetected by all but the most sensitive of man's instruments, at times, not even by them.

Was it so different with other things? He tried in the cool darkness of his room to imagine what it would be like to die all alone. He thought of himself in the woods, crouching by the tree and listening as if in the center of a huge dome. He could not imagine what death was like, could not imagine himself unable to see, to think, to feel. It seemed as if he was bound up in too many things, as if his life was not just within his body but within every other living thing around him,

in the hard woof of his desk and the branches slapping against his window, in the stars, as remote and inaccessible as they seemed, but most of all in the stallion and the ground they had ridden over, all of it part of him and contingent with his life, renewed out of some reservoir beyond his consciousness but felt by him as he had felt the power, subtle and real, between himself and the stallion. How could he think of an end when it seemed there was no end, not of anything that he knew.

The horseman, too, riding out of the heart of some mystery, the will of something stronger, older than men, forever teaching them what they were forever forgetting; they, too, were animals and part of the mystery.

Wade gazed blankly out the window where the blue purity of sky was crowded with heavy white clouds. What kind of man would know that? He would be able to understand animals at a word or a glance; they would trust him. He would understand the peculiar, disturbing pain in the changing of seasons and what the deeply buried memories of violence and sudden death meant, ever-shocking people who lived where death was abhorant and even unnatural in their way of thinking. Was that the knowledge of death the rider carried?

They had read in school of Greek legends where the god was a provider for future life, bringing a beginning out of burning flesh and ritual. It was a celebration and a victory, that arrival.

But Wade saw the rider always alone, the isolation and endless search, the horse stepping out firmly, tirelessly. Sometimes he imagined him like a Western hero, descending to set right what had been usurped

by the villan, but always in the end leaving, defeated in some way by the very act of saving. Good people not strong enough to do it themselves, grateful to and yet afraid of the deliverer who might or might not have a name or origins, something in the rootlessness and competence for killing more an enemy to them than the evil it sought to destroy.

He felt that it was something beyond law, good and evil. It was as though he had come to the edge of a dark cave opening before him, and he wanted to go in but knew, without knowing how he knew, that to enter it was to be lost.

He had always been afraid of the dark, but the rider was not afraid of it, felt it like a protection, moving slowly around him as though it were some vague and ephemeral mist. The man's sensitive knowledge of what lay behind the dark was like invisible hands touching things, known and knowing them as he passed, all of it coming to him in waves like color or scent. It was all part of Wade, too, but there was still something in it that frightened him.

Maybe, he thought, I'm a sport. He had heard his father talk about throwbacks, genetic traits skipping decades or lying dormant for generations and then suddenly coming out again. He found the genetics chapter in a biology book, but it told him only about sweet peas and fruit flies, recessive and dominant characteristics in hair and eye color, nothing more.

But someone must have felt these things before, he reasoned, written them down. Maybe someone in the family. He asked his mother.

She paused over a list of Republican voters drawn up for her by

the Kiwanis president. "Sometimes I think a precinct is run by telephone," she had said once. The auditorium bond was coming to a vote soon.

She bit the end of her pen and frowned absently.

"I don't think anyone kept a diary, except your great aunt Charlotte, the one who was married to Charles Hazard."

"Well, what about the others--did anybody ever turn outlaw or something?"

"Heavens, aren't we bloodthirsty today. What brought all this about?"

"I was just thinking." He liked asking his mother questions. She knew when not to ask them back.

"Oh. Well, let me think."

Wade sat straddling a kitchen chair opposite her. She looked very young to be fifty-three. Wade had always thought of her as thirty-five, something in her still unblunted, still able to be surprised by things. His father looked young, too, but that seemed more like an image frozen rather than something perpetually renewed. He found it more and more strange to think of them as his parents.

"No...none of your father's people were ever in trouble that way. Of course a few have gotten themselves killed out of pure stubbornness, but the Hazards were always a careful, sober, hard-working lot. My side was distinguished by only one case of insanity. A great aunt--no, it was a great, great aunt. Hetty, everyone called her. She died when I was little, but I remember the stories she used to tell, all about ghosts and dead people. We lived in this horrible little farm

town in Kansas where all you could hear at night was the wind. No wonder she went crazy."

"What were some of the stories?"

"Oh there were lots of them. I remember one in particular, though, because she used to tell it over and over. It was about a man who lived down the street, Daniel Barry."

She stared out the window where the sunlight showed all the pale blue streaks in the glass and made it seem as if there was nothing outside but an incandescent fog. Wade watched his mother's face as she stared at it as if she were creating Barry in front of her where she could recall more exactly what she had been told.

"What did he do?" Wade asked.

"Oh he was something of a case himself. He was telling people man would fly and talk through wires years before it happened."

"Really?"

"Hmmm. Everyone thought he was crazy. Hetty called him a prophet. She said he was built like a prophet, too, slender and eyes that seemed to jump out at you, black hair, very fine, sensitive features, like a poet, I guess, or composer. They say he hated books, though, and wouldn't let anyone in his house read. But there wasn't a dog in town or in the country that would dare bark at him. He must have seemed something like the devil."

"What did he do? Murder somebody?"

"No," his mother laughed. "It was about the time he died. He walked into the house one day and announced that at five o'clock that Sunday evening he was going to die. You know, he went to bed for two

days, and at five o'clock that Sunday," she tapped her finger on the table," it happened." Her eyes were wide and intense like a child telling a guarded secret.

"Is that all?" Wade asked.

"No. At five o'clock that same day, at the same time, Hetty's husband saw him ten miles out of town."

"How could he?" Wade asked, feeling the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. "He was dead."

"I don't know, but that's what Hetty told me. She said her husband was driving in from the next town, bringing flour or something and he saw a rider coming toward him. It turned out to be Daniel Barry. He asked Barry where he was going, but the man just stopped and stared at him and wouldn't answer. Then Hetty said that it was like everything, the fields on either side of the road, the horse Barry was riding, the birds, everything was looking at her husband and that it was like some huge eye staring. Then Barry rode past him. When he, Hetty's husband, looked around again, the road was empty. Of course Hetty had a very vivid imagination. She also told me that her husband used to come and see her at night and tell her how things were on the other side. She used to shout at him that he couldn't possibly be in heaven since he only went to church at Easter. I can remember waking up and hearing her. My mother finally had to put her in the state home in Topeka. She was a big woman and used to stamp on the floor like she was coming through."

"Then it isn't really true about Barry?"

"I don't know. But the story used to seem real enough when I

was little. Sometimes I thought I heard a horse go by, and I'd bury my head under the pillow and get way down at the foot of the bed," she laughed. "Hetty never said the man was violent, but I always thought of him as seven feet tall with green eyes and a voice like thunder roaring--always after me of course or the kitten I had then."

"What about now?"

"Oh, when we lived on the farm before Chuck was born and I was alone at nights, sometimes I'd get to thinking about it again. Isn't that silly?"

"How come nothing like that ever happens around here?"

"Would you want it to?"

"Well...I don't know. Imagine talking to somebody and then finding out later that they were dead. Gosh!"

Wade rested his chin on the back of the chair. He imagined the solitary rider coming down the road, not hurrying, but invested with patience as if he knew where he had to go and it was a long way off, and he didn't care. He thought of hearing something like that going by in the dark, that forbidding and furious presence not even death could hold back. He wondered if the horse had been like the sorrel stallion.

"Where was he going?" Wade asked.

His mother looked up from the list.

"Who?"

"Barry."

"Oh, Hetty never said. I guess no one told her."

He began collecting pictures of horses, tacking them up over his desk where he could look at them while he studied. He daydreamed about the stallion and himself, working alone, running alone, race horses, cow horses, a hunter in a show, the steeplechase with the long bodies stretched perilously over a viciously high jump, a jarring misstep and death, the wilderness and its secret. He studied the brilliant play of light off gleaming hides and thought about the stallion who even though he was older was still beautiful, the wicked curve of his neck, the massive shoulders and long, straight legs, and the eyes. He saw himself riding bareback, bending his body with every subtle shift in the horse's stride, every change in direction, leading and following the stallion's will. For the first time he began to think about a name for the horse, but none that he thought of seemed to fit. People named storms, mountains, rivers, imposing a sense of familiarity where none existed, but he could not think of a name that he felt would be right for the stallion, anymore than he could have called his mother Katherine. There was his color, sorrel, and that seemed as good a name as any, but there was nothing that he could call the hot, vivid life he had felt under his hands or the power in those lunging strides.

As much as he worked at home to find a way to get the horse back, Wade also tried to get closer to the way animals thought, to understand their world. He would sit out in the back yard for two or three hours at a time, at first just to watch the birds, trying to reach them, their bright, quick movements never still, always on the alert as if feeling some threat perpetually hanging over them.

Cats were that way, too. They seemed to change once they were

outside, their bodies gathered and tensed, alert to every sound and movement near them. They didn't like to be picked up or held, squirming until he put them down. At times they would glide off into the dense grass and shrubs beyond the yard, and he was unaware of their leaving, so quietly they moved.

Dogs were tamer; they didn't seem to notice much beyond the scent they were pursuing or the people they followed, and they made too much noise. All tame animals were that way, the constant vigilance unnecessary to their lives, some special sense dulled that was not just sight or hearing but a felt apprehension of danger.

He tried to subdue the sharp, analytical part of his mind and feel the world like a texture between his hands, letting it come to him as sound or smell, movement; tried to touch the life below him rather than stopping each form just before he apprehended it and labeling it with a name he had been taught. It was very hard to do, but for brief moments he felt the world as a new place where there were no names, only qualities identified as familiar and unfamiliar. A subtle tightness seemed to run through him; he felt always on guard.

He wanted animals, mostly wild animals to trust him, and he tried to catch their moods by making his mind go blank, but he could never be sure if he was really catching them or making it all up himself because he wanted to know so badly.

It seemed to him there was a land inside his head, and things that did not fit into his home belonged there. It was something that was part of him like the flow of his blood, uncreated by himself, nor ruled by himself but vital to all of him. The stallion belonged there, was

never really out of his thoughts.

Wade began to think of jobs he could do, ways to make money to be able to keep the horse, but he didn't tell his father or anyone about them just yet. It seemed still too personal, too close to what hurt him, the pain always there like the pain of separation. At times he wished he did not want anything at all, but every time he remembered that ride it returned as strongly as before.

ii

Certain things began to worry him about the way he felt. Try as he might, he could not make himself love people the way they wanted to be loved. "Apparent stellar motion", "efficiency", "nitrogen compounds", "voter turn-out", "non-toxic residue", those were easy words, he thought, they didn't take much to say; but words like love, night, dream, home, wild, want, those were hard words, because they cut deeply into you when you knew what they meant and felt what they stood for. They became harder and harder for him to say and even more difficult for him to understand the way other people used them.

His mother burned her hand and asked him to do the dishes for her. He shrugged sullenly, and she had burst out, "I'd think you'd have just a little compassion." But he hadn't. He felt nothing at all.

Later he was ashamed and cleaned the basement for her unasked, but the compassion was still not there. He felt cool and dedicated inside, but to something he could not explain.

Her hands rubbing his shoulders or stroking his hair no longer gave him the pleasure that it had, although he did like to hear her say

she loved him. And yet there seemed to be a plea in her voice for him to return the words and he never could. When she rubbed his shoulders playfully, he felt the sharp, initial fear of being trapped, and after a moment squirmed until she stopped.

In late March she wanted him to go to a Mother-Son banquet at the church. The night air was losing its chill, and he wanted to get outside, but no amount of pleading would get his mother to change her mind.

At last she looked at him, close to tears, bewildered, he felt, more than hurt.

"It isn't very flattering to me, you know, when you don't want to be there."

He felt sorry for her and they went.

Wade had a good time once darkness blotted out the wide, tree-shaded field behind the church and the curtains were drawn so that he couldn't see out. He forgot about wanting to get away.

There was a funny skit about a mother trying to get her son to join the church choir. They ended by compromising: she would give up on the choir if he would be an acolyte. After the buffet dinner there was a speaker on what it meant to be a mother, and then what it meant to be a son. Wade squeezed his mother's hand under the table, but at the open gratitude in her eyes, he turned away, baffled at his own coldness. She asked for very little; why was it the very thing he could not give?

The banquet chairman led the hall in singing hymns at the end, and after the final benediction by Rev. Dodge everyone left. The

starlight was brilliant in the cool, vibrant air, and on the way home Wade and his mother sang the last words of the hymn, "short as the watch that ends the night". His mother could harmonize beautifully. The softness of their voices was like a veil obscuring the restless pain in his heart and the estrangement he felt until it seemed there had never been anything between them. He rested his head lightly on her shoulder and felt her arm around him once, pressing him against her.

He watched the streetlights flare and die on the roof of the car, and the branches stutter across the window like pickets in a fence. The stars rode with them as if fixed in the windshield. There seemed to be no terror, no pain, no longing in their light. He stared up at them, surrounded by his mother's voice rich with a happiness that was somehow dependent on him. He didn't care and let himself be lulled into a dreamy half-sleep.

The next morning Wade and his father argued over whether the boy should have to go to church. It was the first real fight he had had with his father. Wade gave in and sat silently throughout the service, and the noon meal was silent and strained.

Afterward he went up to his room and shut the door. He lay on his bed listening to the voices downstairs, not the words but the tone of them tense, unnatural. Suddenly he remembered the knife under his bed, and he took the box out, looking at the knife, turning it over and over in his hands. His father had a kit for leather repair. It wouldn't take much to get it back in good condition, he thought.

CHAPTER IX

"You've done a lot better in the last two months, Wade," Jeffers said, tilting back in his chair.

Wade stared at the theme Jeffers had given him. There was a fat A- across the front of it. Wade said nothing.

"In fact you've brought up all your grades. What happened? You get hold of a tail wind somewhere?"

Wade grinned. Jeffers glanced down at a list that was on his desk.

"If you keep your grades up in science, you may be able to take the advanced placement test in May and get into the special course they're setting up this summer at the high school. It would be a great addition to your record, especially if you plan to major in science once you get in high school. You can skip the regular freshman course and go right into the advanced course."

"Oh," Wade said. He stared at his theme. It was a report on the life of Gauguin. Jeffers had had the class write about famous artists for their cultural development unit.

Jeffers waited and Wade shifted uncomfortably, knowing that something was expected of him and unable to give it.

Jeffers shuffled a few half-graded papers into a neat pile, picked up his pen, set it down again and smiled sadly at the boy.

"Don't you want it, Wade?"

"Sure...I guess," he said lamely.

Jeffers picked up the pen, clicking it slowly against his cheekbone. Wade could feel his eyes, not concentrated and accusing like his father's, but questioning, puzzled.

"Some of the other teachers have been telling me that Redquist is causing a lot of trouble on the playground. Organizing fights or something."

"Wars, he calls them," Wade said. "He gets a bunch of guys and they start fighting other guys from five and sixth grades, seventh graders, too, sometimes."

Wade had not come home once in two weeks without a bruise somewhere or a torn shirt. His mother was tired of buying him new ones. He didn't mind the fights. They never lasted long and nobody really got hurt except when they got mad and started hitting a little too hard. Wade had noticed that Redquist had been singling him out lately. And Ralph. There was something between Ralph and Jerry now. Wade had caught Redquist saying something about Pat Buckner to Ralph and the younger boy had flushed angrily and walked away. He wouldn't tell Wade what it was all about.

"We're going to have to do something about that boy," Jeffers said. "He's getting too damn big to be with the other kids. I've noticed he's been going at you lately. Any idea why?"

"No, unless he thinks I talked Ralph into leaving his stupid gang."

"You can handle it?"

"Sure..."

"You guess," Jeffers added and they both laughed.

"Well," Jeffers said, "what do you think about Gauguin?"

"How come no one liked his work, just because it was different?"

"Oh, I guess people don't like their lives disturbed. They want things neat and tidy where they can see everything working as it should."

"But why?"

Jeffers laughed. "I can't really tell you. Men have been working on that for a long time and still haven't come up with any answers."

"Maybe it's because things stop hurting them."

Jeffers looked at him strangely for a moment, then stared at the papers on his desk.

"What put that idea into your head?"

"I was just thinking once. Well, if something hurts you, you do something about it, like Gauguin. He put things down on paper. Only the things that hurt him didn't hurt other people so they thought he was crazy. Isn't that right?"

Jeffers didn't answer for a moment. There seemed to be a deeper sadness in his eyes. Finally he said, "Wade, pick out something you want to be and make it practical so you won't ever have to worry about money."

He sounded so earnest that Wade began to feel uneasy.

"Why?"

"Because...because the way you're going now--" he stopped, clicking the pen. "You see things, feel things. The worst thing in the world for someone with a passionate heart is to get it broken."

"But Dad says if you pick out what you want and work at it, you can't fail."

"Your father is a lucky man."

"But if people don't like what they're doing, why don't they find something else?"

"It's not that simple. Nothing is that simple."

"I'd leave if I didn't like what I was doing."

Jeffers looked at him. "Would you?"

Wade didn't answer, confused.

"Well," Jeffers said, "I guess that's all for today. I think you'll only need another week or two. Better read that next chapter in Understanding Language. You've got theme writing down, but you still don't have any idea how to identify a gerund from a participle."

Ralph was waiting for him as he came out of the school building. The warmer spring air made them feel like running and they raced each other across the street, slowing down only when they hit the soft, clinging mud of the vacant field on the other side.

"What did Jeffers tell you today?" Ralph asked, breathing hard.

"About some test in science. I guess I should have said I was glad about it."

"They all think those things are a big deal. Last year Miss Dimmick wanted me to be in some kind of reading thing because I was good at memorizing--what's the matter, Wade?"

Wade had stopped, staring in the direction of the highway. They could barely see five boys walking along the road. One of them had very pale hair.

"Oh them," Ralph said. "They've started going to Harris's--" he stopped, seeing the look on Wade's face.

"What do they go there for?" Wade could feel the mud seep around his boots and the cold edging in.

"How should I know? You think I go around with that bunch of creeps?"

Wade looked at him until Ralph burst out,

"The horse isn't there--what are you so hot about?"

"Let's follow them."

"What for?"

"Come on, Ralph."

"Naw." Ralph humped his shoulders as though bracing against a rope pulling at him and looked the other way, down the highway where his house was hidden by a curve in the road.

Wade studied his face curiously.

"You afraid to go?"

Ralph shrugged. "Naw, I just don't want to, that's all. Christ, I don't have to go everywhere you do, do I?"

"You don't have to go anywhere."

"Well, all right, then." He didn't move.

"What do they do at Harris's, Ralph?"

Ralph stared off at his home, then kicked the ground stubbornly.

"You are scared of them," Wade said.

"I am not! Just because I don't want to go with you, you think I'm scared of a bunch of creeps like that? I just don't want to, that's all. Do I have to spell it or something?"

He broke into a quick jog, leaving Wade behind. Wade didn't follow him, watching the brown jacket and pants grow smaller and smaller

across the field until they disappeared down the highway.

He stared at the woods, started to head for the highway and then stopped. No, he would stay away from Harris. He wanted nothing from the man anymore.

The wind riffled the short spear grass at his feet. Green was beginning to take over the barren gray-brown of winter, the color pale and young at first, waited for, hungered for by everything that had held out through the winter. Spring was hardest when you had to wait so long; it always seemed that more had to be awakened than lulled to sleep.

The house was empty when he got home; there was a note from his mother that she would be at the poles until after six o' clock. The bond issue was being decided that day. He had forgotten that.

It was funny when the house was quiet, like something had died or gone out, and the whole house waited expectantly for its return, infecting him with the same sense of expectation. He couldn't seem to start anything and wandered aimlessly into the living room. The West Lake newspaper was on the couch. There was a section on country clubs and charity shows, maybe he could get a few names of people owning horses and running hunts and start from there to find out who had the stallion.

He didn't see the article until he was half way down the page. It was short, in smaller type, the lead saying only, "Woodstock Farmer Fatally Injured." The article said a Leonard Brad had been fatally injured while trying to train a horse for a hunting event in the local McHenry County horse show. The horse had refused a jump and thrown

Brad who had cracked his skull on the jump poles. The horse Vindicator II, a sorrel stallion recently purchased from a Mr. Issac Harris, had then battered his way out of the training ring. An hour later he had been caught and destroyed. There was rumor of a law suit against Harris.

Wade read it again and then a third time. Pain seemed a knife blade opening in his chest. He tore the article out of the paper and crushed it in his fist. The house was choking him; he threw on his jacket and went outside, heading away from Harris's woods, north toward school and the land beyond it where he had been only once or twice before.

He could not think. His legs moved tirelessly, his head thrown back a little, not knowing or caring where the walk would take him.

The ground was soft under his feet, short, stiff spears of green starting up. He passed the school and the railroad bridge, passed a doctor's red brick building and climbed over a barbed wire fence into country he did not know, driven by a desperation that he couldn't ease. Sparrows like a handful of dust tossed into the air crossed the cloud-streaked sky and vanished into bare trees, hidden by the faint green flush on the branches.

Children's voices yelled somewhere to his right, and he passed a dirt road where cheap, prefab houses lined either side. The children, towing each other in wagons, stared at him as he passed. Two of them trampled down snow still left in shaded parts of the street. A gray and white terrier rushed at him, barking, but Wade didn't look down, and the dog stopped, trembling slightly as if cold. It followed after him for a few steps, sniffing at his scent, then turned and ran back.

He kept going until the land buckled into gentle, sloping hills that reached the horizon and seemed to drop off the end of the earth. Farm houses broke up the soft hillsides, telephone poles sectioned them into squares while farther out tall, silver transmitters linked their wires in a series of graceful arcs across the horizon.

He felt something in him building, the pressure unbearable until he had to stop, leaning against the rough trunk of an elm tree. He felt his throat burn as if it had been scorched and his stomach ached, a sickness deep insides steady and painful.

A wide, deep ravine opened below him. It was a tangle of underbrush laced through with winding trails, a few trees lifting well over his head. To the left of the ravine was a forest of sumac, still stripped by the winter, standing nearly twelve feet tall. On the right the ravine was shallower, lifting to a shelf of black earth only three feet deep; beyond a small copse of willows trailed their slender, whip-like branches in a shallow pond dotted with small islets and disappearing into a marsh of cattail reeds.

He didn't know where he was and didn't care, looking only for someplace to get away from the pain that swelled in his chest. Wade slipped down the edge of the ravine and pushed his way through the thin branches that were so closely woven they seemed like hands interlocked against him, and he slashed his arms to break them, finally coming to a wider trail. He walked toward the opposite rim, then stopped. A groundhog was crouched in the grass ahead of him. It didn't move even when he was only a few feet away. And then he saw why. Its eyes stared unblinkingly at him and the four tiny paws were

curled toward its belly. Worms had attacked its soft underside and he could see ants threading their way across its dry fur.

Wade looked around him, saw a heavy stick in the underbrush and flipped the groundhog over, then began smashing at the worms, crushing them into the soft earth, feeling the shock of each blow like a vengeance, beating until there was nothing left to strike. Then he lifted the groundhog on the end of the stick and flung the stiff body out of the ravine.

He sank to his knees, forehead against his hands that rested on top of the stick. He closed his eyes, tried to close his mind to what he had seen, and after awhile the rage passed, leaving him weak and tired. Somewhere a bird was washing itself, the flapping wings like the sound of plastic. Wade looked up at the pond and saw the bird, feathers gleaming a polished black in the water, dipping its head and throwing water over its back.

The bird flew off as Wade approached, and it trailed a brief tail of silver from its feathers. The boy waved a spot in the water clear and drank, drying his hands on his slacks.

There was something strong and clear in him now, the anger burned to a fine point that made him feel years older and more sure of himself. His eyes probed every thicket in the ravine and the trails cutting through them. The network of branches was delicate and secretive softened by tiny green leaves that seemed to shelter a life separate and distinct from their own. He felt here a quietness, a peace that was not in himself, as though it contained a capacity to receive anything he might bring to it.

Wade began to explore the ravine more carefully, stopping every now and then to listen as something snapped in the underbrush or disturbed the branches, feeling the subtle movement around him like a flow of air past his body.

He found rusted beer cans, bottles, barrel staves so old they crumbled into flakes when he tried to pick them up, mattress springs, a few parts from cars, junk discarded and forgotten for so long the ravine had taken it all into itself and was changing it back into the elements it had been before given shape. Wade threw out some of the junk and buried the rest as well as he could.

Moving slowly he slipped easily through the ravine now, and on the far side of it found what he was looking for. The bushes arched over meeting at the top, creating a natural hollow like a cave, nearly four feet high and running back to the side of the ravine. There were stones to make a fireplace in the ground, enough room for two people to move around inside. Something else would be needed. He looked around vaguely, his hands resting on his hips, then remembered the knife. Yes, he would bring that.

At the top of the ravine he paused, looking down at it. He would tell Ralph, and they could fix it up. It would be just theirs. The late afternoon sun had left all but the top branches of the ravine, and the atmosphere of it seemed to change, draw back into itself and draw him with it. Something seemed to know him, as if out of the stallion's death a third shape had been created, formed in him and around himself. Home was more strange to him now than this place. Its quiet a willingness to let him come whenever he wished and to leave, not be-

fore he was ready, but when he wished. There was time here, and the slow, silent growth of things and the promise of some knowledge if he would take it.

Wade felt a ball of paper in his pocket and remembered the newspaper article. He let it drop from his hand; in time it would decay back into the earth that had given it shape.

He started for home, back up the long, grass-covered ridge to the top where he could see the school like a dark gray smudge against the sky. He had come less than a mile, and it had seemed like a hundred.

Wade broke into a trot, shying when a rabbit leaped almost from under his feet. He felt above him the austere loneliness of a brilliant sky, thunderheads massing in the south for another rain storm, their deep, broad shapes dwarfing the earth below. He flung his head back to catch the wind carrying them, their beauty like pain, filling him with a savage joy.

He passed the framehouses, staring at them with a visionary's contempt; unafraid, somehow beyond their power to reach or hurt, beyond anyone's power to reach or hurt.

CHAPTER X

Early in May Wade took the advanced test in science and passed. His mother was very proud, and that night she made the dinner a celebration, even bringing out the wine she was always saving for special occasions.

Wade tried to be as happy as she was about it, but half-way through the meal when his mother and father were talking about his future opportunities, he felt a wave of nausea take away his appetite. It seemed as though their voices beat on him not as words but painful sounds whose pitch was strangely dissonant and piercing. After a moment the feeling passed, but the memory of it made everything seem like an ironic joke.

He was in bed when his mother came in, bringing his shorts and a few T-shirts to put away. Only the desk light was on; he was reading for a history test, not really seeing the book, not really remembering what he read. He had been thinking about the stallion, still hoping, in an unreasoning way, that he would find another horse like him and start all over; only this time he would know what to do.

His mother moved outside the white circle of light thrown over the floor and his bed, then hesitated at the door and came over to sit beside him. She had her hair brushed back. The light caught it like a soft, brown wing. Chuck's hair was the same color. His own was like his father's. He had his father's features, too, and yet they didn't really look alike, not when they were together.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing." He put the book down.

"You haven't been bringing home any more torn shirts. Have they finally declared the war over?"

"I guess so. This guy Redquist is doing something else now, nobody knows what."

His mother smoothed down his hair, her eyes studying the thin lines of his face.

"You aren't getting enough sleep. Dark circles under your eyes. Wade, is something wrong? You've been shutting yourself away lately like a hermit."

He had told no one about the horse, held silent by some inhibition he didn't understand himself. Her words seemed like slender threads thrown across, across some gulf separating them, and sometimes he wanted to grab one and hold tight to it, and sometimes he wanted to keep them all away. Her hands were still now. They were strong hands, the veins puffed out, blue in the light, and small brown spots dotted the backs.

"It isn't good to be alone, Wade. You ought to get out more, get into some school projects or go to some of the dances they give."

"But, Mom, what if I don't want to?"

"Have you given them a chance?"

He was silent. She seemed terribly earnest.

"You have to need people, Wade. Nobody can make it on their own. I don't want to see you unhappy."

He traced a small design in his bedspread. "Mother."

"What?"

"Did you have much trouble growing up?"

She laughed. "Yes, I guess so. I remember my mother and I used to have terrible fights--I'd make her cry."

"Really? What did you fight about?"

"Oh, dating boys, staying out late, lots of things."

"What about Chuck?"

"Yes, he and your father had some very good arguments."

"Why am I different, Mother?"

"Different?"

"How come I'm not like Chuck and Dad?"

She put one hand on his shoulder.

"You're not different, not really. You just need to get out with people more and work with them, learn from them. After all, the world is run by people and you're going to have to live in it."

"But why?"

She laughed. "Why? Well, unless you plan on joining the animals, you don't have much choice."

"No, I mean, why should everybody have to get out with people? Couldn't some of them just live apart and nobody bother them?"

"You wouldn't like that. It would be terribly lonely."

"There are worse things than being lonely."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," he said vaguely, keeping the answer from her. Not knowing if you are human, he thought.

"Mother, are you happy?"

"Why, yes, I think so. "Well," she thought for a moment. "I guess

no parent is really happy or feels they've really succeeded until their children are married happily and have children of their own."

"Would you be unhappy if I didn't get married?"

"Well, I can't help but feel that no one man and no one woman is fulfilled until they marry. I think it's very important for each one to feel love and responsibility, just as it's important for a woman to be needed. I want you to be happy, Wade, and I think loving someone and raising a family is still the best way."

"Oh." He rested his chin on his knees, struggling with another question that he didn't know if he should ask.

"Mother, would you still--you said." He looked away from her.

"Would you still love me if you found out I wasn't your son?"

She laughed. "What put that idea into your head? As far as I know everything was legal." She saw his face and the laughter died. On impulse her arms went around him. "Yes, I would love you if you turned out to be the son of a Chinese emperor."

He laughed. "Mother, be serious."

"I am. Wade, remember what I said. It's not good to be too independent--don't frown that way. No one gets anywhere without help. Give people a chance to know you--they want to, you know. It would please your father no end to see you getting out and working on something. All right? Will you give it a try?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Well," She got up. "You think about it. Good night."

He lay back in the dark, wondering what she was getting at, why she wanted to make him do something he didn't like. Need people. They

were always there, what was there to need about them? He did not understand. What he wanted to know, no one could tell him.

He flipped the window curtain over his head and stared outside. The moon was so bright he could see almost to the school and beyond where the light turned trees into their own ghosts. The stillness was expectation, something in the air holding its breath and waiting for the lines of hill and building to break, flow into one another with the fluidity night alone possessed, for some presence who would give the night its meaning; the rider always about to come over the crest of the hill, black, silent, a taut moment when the land braced itself. He could feel his arms trembling, his body tight with longing.

When he got to the lumber yard that Saturday, his father was waiting for him, and he took Wade into the yard where they could talk. The front of the store was crowded with Saturday carpenters, and in the warehouse the grating, high-pitched shriek of a table saw obliterated every other sound.

Wade loved the smell of freshly-cut wood. It was clean and sharp, reminding him of White Pines, and he liked to hear the men talk about "fifty board feet of primed white oak," and "Creosoted poles" and "minor-
ing angles to coincide with specifications". The talk seemed to raise them above the ordinary, and for a few moments they became expert and confident, each man his own idea of what was the best within him. Jokes shot back and forth, creating a comfortable atmosphere in the warehouse, a masculine world where he felt accepted.

It was hot in the lumber yard, sunlight beating with a soft glare

off cords of wood and stacks of banded two-by-fours. At the end of the lot three men were loading hoops of baling wire into a truck.

Rob watched them for a moment, one hand on his son's shoulder. One of the men was yelling at the others to keep the wire level between them, only one slipped and the wire crashed to the ground, almost dragging the third man with it. Rob shook his head.

"Damn fool Berkley. He could hook that wire to the loading tackle and have the job done in about ten seconds. No, he's got to do it the old way, man sweat. Won't he ever give it up?"

"Hey, Rob," someone said behind them. They turned to see Tom Andrews, one of the men who worked for Wade's father. "That contractor from Ladd Homes is here. He wants two thousand feet of plywood cut-- that's almost fifteen hundred feet more than he called in for yesterday. Says he's got to have it in three days."

Rob stared thoughtfully at the warehouse where a small, gray-haired man stood framed in the doorway that loomed enormous around him.

"All right, set that Ernest order back three days and go ahead with this one. Tell him next time to make allowances and give us his estimate to the highest round figure--he can always sell off what's left. At this rate he's never going to get those houses built."

"Well, he seems to be doing damn good for himself. Ladd's started another project over by the city park. We're going to be rich men if this boom keeps going."

"Not if the price of lumber keeps going right along with it. I'll talk to him in a minute. You get the wood ready."

After Andrews had gone, Rob turned to look at Wade.

"Your mother and I had a little talk last night."

Wade knew that in his father's language they had had an argument.

"It seems she's worried about you."

"Oh."

"You've been moping around lately like a sick cow. Late for meals, sloppy dress, keeping off to yourself. Do you think that's a very adult way to act?"

Wade looked down at his feet.

"No," he murmured.

"I know about the stallion." Wade looked up at him sharply. His father's face was set in one of its stern expressions. "One of the men in the store told me. It's too bad, but you remember what I told you might happen. Now are you going to take it, accept it, or go around sulking like a little boy?"

"But, Dad, that's not why--"

"You have Monday off from school, don't you?"

"Y-yes," he said, confused.

"I talked to Carl McKenna this morning. He says if you want to go he'll take you to the race track Monday morning and show you around. Well?"

He wished his father would not throw things at him like this. It always caught him off guard.

"Well, I--"

"Do you or don't you?" His father gripped him by the shoulder.

"Look at me."

Wade squinted up at the blue eyes, feeling now a rebellious strength

to meet them.

"I want you to make up your mind right here and now. I've had enough of this on again off again, yes, no, with you. After I've gone to the trouble of talking to Carl, asking him to give up his time, how do you think it's going to look if I have to tell him you don't want to go because you want something else now? How do you think that's going to make me look? I've told you that land of ours can be used, that I'd supply what's needed for the first few years--you've got everything right in the palm of your hand. I can't do everything for you, you're going to have to make the effort sometime, decide on something or you'll end up like a damned drifter. Now are you going to be sensible and start acting like you have some responsibility in your head?"

The hand gripping his shoulder had tightened painfully. Wade wanted to say no, he didn't want to go with McKenna, but his father's words seemed to confuse him and he decided to compromise.

"All right, Dad, I'll go."

The hand relaxed. "Give him a call this afternoon. I've always wanted to get rid of the damned barbed wire on that farm. White fences, horse farms always have white fences."

Wade said nothing.

"Keep your eyes open, remember what you see. Ask questions. That's how you set out to learn anything. One more thing, Wade; I don't want you worrying your mother anymore. Shape up, get that hang-dog look off your face. There's no surer way in the world to drive a woman crazy than to go around looking miserable all the time."

"Yes, sir."

His father looked at him and sighed.

"Sometimes I get so mad I could shake your teeth loose and other times I'm so damned proud of you--your science teacher told me only twenty-three out of a hundred and fifteen passed that placement test. You can do it if you want to. Let's keep it up, all right, son? I think your mother would be very happy even if you decide on raising horses. With the two of us she wouldn't have much choice."

He slapped Wade on the back. "Go on in and help Tom get that plywood set up. I'm going to tell Berkley to use that loading tackle. Otherwise he'll be all day at that damned thing."

That afternoon Wade called McKenna. The man told him to be out in front of his house at five o'clock in the morning, and McKenna would pick him up. Wade thought five o'clock was awfully early. They compromised on six. At least he could have that the way he wanted it.

CHAPTER XI

"Lucky your Dad caught me when he did," McKenna said. "I was out looking at brood mares all week-end. Can't seem to find a decent one in the county. You listen to your Dad, Wade. He's a good businessman."

Wade sat pressed against the door of McKenna's truck. The boy had sat on his front doorstep in the blue-gray dawn light, half-hoping McKenna had forgotten about him. They were driving now toward Arlington race track.

The truck cab smelled of horses and damp straw. Curled around Wade's feet was part of an old horse blanket that kept his legs warm. McKenna had his window down, one short, chubby arm resting on the sill. Now and then he yawned with an agonizing stretch of his jaws, reminding Wade of an old dog whose face recedes in thin, sharp folds and falls foreward again. McKenna blinked the tears out of his eyes and glanced at the boy.

"Better get used to these early hours if you want to be a trainer," he said, grinning.

Wade smiled back at him, "No, I'm all right."

He looked out across the flat, green plains where the sun rose like a sphere of molten iron through the ground fog, burning clear to the hot blue sky above. Blue--that was a color that always affected him.

"Weather man promising a fast track Saturday. Damn it all, I wish it would rain. Be easier on Tribute. That's the colt I've got

running in the Woodhouse Memorial." McKenna rubbed his face and pulled at his nose. "He likes a muddy track."

Wade said nothing. The truck seemed to be going too fast, the telephone poles on either side whipping by like fence posts.

"Say, if you're lucky Johnny Sellars or Willie the Shoe might be around," McKenna said. "Sometimes those guys like to work out the colts they're going to ride. You can tell a lot about a colt from the way he works out. Can't push 'em too hard, too fast." He shook his head. "I don't know...sometimes this business can get to you. I was telling Mr. Borodine, he owns the stable I work for, I was saying, 'You know, a man could sink his whole life into this and end up with nothing.' He says to me, 'Carl, you know what you're talking about.' Your dad, now, though...I remember when that lumber yard was nothing more than a big stack of sawdust. He done real well with it. Not that racing ain't been good to me. I just get to thinking sometimes."

McKenna had been a jockey himself once, then joined the Navy the day after Pearl Harbor; intended to get out when it was all over; wound up staying in for fifteen years. Never went to the race track, he told Wade, just never wanted to. Then one day, in California and on his way to sign up for another five years, he ran into an old friend and got side-tracked at the Santa Anita Handicap and never made it to the Naval base. He tried riding again--he had only been thirty-five at the time--but it was no good. He had lost the rhythm, the feel of it. It was as if the impersonal, driving rhythm of machinery had planted itself inside him and left room for nothing else.

But he knew horses and he knew racing, and after five years of

catching up, he had hired on as trainer for Borodine Stables. He was near sixty now, but didn't look it. His face still had some of the blandness of youth. McKenna's job was to make sure the two-and three-year-olds in Borodine's stable gave a top performance in every race.

The Arlington track sign flashed briefly in the sun as they turned from the highway onto a dirt road. Through the high wire gate and across the parking lot Wade could see the main track where two horses floated through the fog, their riders standing easily in the small stirrups. A glass and steel grandstand gleamed like fire to one side of the track.

McKenna drove toward five red, blue and yellow striped horse barns, behind and to one side of the grandstand. The barns looked old, their colors faded and peeling. Wade had expected something more modern. Even the sleek, aluminum trailers where the jockeys liked disappointed him. They looked like trailers on a construction site where the earth was blasted, leveled, forced into a uniform, useful shape.

A half mile track curved behind the barns, and McKenna explained it was used to exercise the colts, run the fat off them. It seemed crowded now, nearly all the colts on it snubbed to a horse and rider. Wade leaned forward watching them. A flurry of loose earth kicked up, the short, sharp cries of the riders and they rushed toward the far end where horse, rider and colt merged, multicolored tails mingling as their speed whipped them about. Wade caught glimpses of their sleek, naked heads--nostrils flaring. Did they ever break away from the riders?

"Naw. Oh now and then one of them will," McKenna said. "Whirl-away, now. If that horse wanted to go up the grandstand, up the grand-

stand he'd go. I've seen some jocks get busted up that way."

Wade felt a sinking dread inside him. He could see the struggle, a bright sorrel colt crashing through the white fence and the man lying on the ground.

"What--what happens to them, the jockeys, I mean?"

"Oh, if they ain't hurt too bad they start riding again. If they can't, well, some work as valets for other jocks in the dressing room, some just bum around stables taking whatever they can get. This is the only world they know, the only thing they can do. You gotta have a place to go, that's all."

"Do some of them train horses, like you?"

"Yeah, some of them do that." He was watching the riders bunched up against the horses' necks.

They parked the truck near a barn with "Borodine" blazed across the roof in white letters. Pools of water still stood where horses had been sponged down, and flies lifted and swarmed around their edges.

The bright sky made Wade squint as he got out. In the shadow of the barn grooms and exercise boys talked in quiet, clipped voices, some of them sweeping down the concrete apron in front of the stalls, others sitting idly, legs draped over canvas chairs.

Ahead of them blue awnings flapped down to shade the stalls. The length of the barn was cluttered with buckets, brooms, training saddles, bales of hay clean-smelling and stacked against the green, peeling walls, and sweat blankets tossed over the rails. Two Negro grooms were saddling a bay colt while the trainer and jockey watched, and Wade could hear the trainer saying, "Hold him in, for God's sake. He burns himself

out in the first quarter every damn time." The colt danced sideways, nipped at his two grooms, trying to twist away from them.

McKenna looked at the men, then at Wade and shook his head. This is what I'd have to learn, Wade thought. Pace, timing, control. McKenna knows all about that. He looked down at his hands. Discipline, too, he thought, and remembered the reins burning through his fingers.

In the center of the land between barns a chestnut filly, being sponged down, shook herself and sent a wet, silver spray over McKenna and the boy. Wade laughed, brushing the water out of his hair.

"Hey, Eddy," McKenna said, "You got hold of that female?"

A tall Negro ducked under the filly's neck. He was so thin his hands and feet flapped like loose strips of cloth at the end of his shirt and trousers.

"Say, Mr. McKenna. How's that colt of yours?"

"Wade and me are going to check on him now. Wade here is learning the horse raising business--myabe end up a trainer."

"That so?" Eddy's voice was like a hand extended. "You listen to the guys around here, and you'll pick up a lot of stuff."

"Tell your boss I'll see him later."

"Say," Eddy said after them, "he ain't had a drink in so long his elbow creaks."

They stopped at the last stall in the barn and McKenna, talking in a low, crooning voice to let the colt know they were coming in, pushed the dutch door open. Wade saw the shadowy outline of the colt's groom, a man McKenna called Greg, but it took longer for him to distinguish between the shadows and Tribute himself.

Only when McKenna stepped aside did Wade see the swift, snake-like turn of the colt's head, his eyes so direct and arresting that for a moment it was like seeing the stallion again. He defied them, looking out from the same feral world where Wade felt men could not go, but at times, like himself, approached with longing. All the old love for the stallion that he had thought had dulled rose up again.

Greg had taken hold of the halter, but the colt ignored him, ears pricked tightly forward, watching as McKenna approached slowly. His gray head seemed tense with an inner control, the violence in him all the more impressive, because it did not seem visible except in the nostrils extended full and red and the slight trembling of the legs. Wade felt the oppressive closeness of the walls, almost as if something else were filling the stall with its presence.

Wade watched as Tribute allowed McKenna to lift his foreleg. There was a quarter crack in the hoof, held firm by a bar shoe.

Greg's hold on the halter loosened, and Tribute reached out at the boy, catching his scent. Wade held out his hand, a wordless murmur rising in his throat. The colt shied, nearly upsetting McKenna.

He reached out again, his large, liquid eyes burning with rebellion, and the soft gray muzzle touched his hand, blew warmly on it. The pungent odor of manure and newly-cut grass surrounded them.

McKenna dropped the foreleg, and Tribute jerked back, flattening his ears wickedly. Wade leaned back against the wall.

"How'd he go yesterday?" McKenna asked Greg.

"Fine. I walked him around some to keep that leg from getting stiff, but he's favoring it a little this morning. He's down for a

nine-thirty workout." Greg glanced curiously at Wade and McKenna turned to include the boy.

"This here's Wade Hazard. Wade's going to be a trainer someday."

"Yeah?" Greg said. "Take a good look at this colt, Wade. He's real quiet now, but you wait until he gets on that track. He ain't bad, you know, just a little high-spirited. Went through three grooms before I got him, and broke a boy's leg at the starting gate two weeks ago. No, sir, ain't no insurance in this job. I don't think he cares for people much."

"You say he's down for a nine-thirty workout?" McKenna said.

"That's right. Bobby Jackson's riding him this morning. He's a real hotshot Borodine sent over."

"Tell Bobby to breeze him for a mile."

"I almost forgot. A reporter from Turf was here earlier. He wanted to know more about Borodine syndicating the colt."

"What's syndicating mean?" Wade asked from behind them.

"Oh, a bunch of men get together and pool money on a horse," McKenna said. He pushed the colt's gray hindquarters away from him.

Tribute swung around like a cat and lashed out at the wall with a ringing smack. Greg braced his weight against the halter.

"What did that reporter guy want?" McKenna asked.

"Wanted to know why we pulled the colt off the West Coast circuits. I said maybe we'd get a break in the weights, since he's going his first real distance. Handicappers already got him up to 125. Oh, and he said something about doing a bit on Borodine; said the man was a real tribute to racing. He was kind of a young kid, college type."

McKenna rubbed the back of his neck and stared down at the colt's cracked hoof. The colt looked beyond him at Wade.

"All right. Keep him off my back for awhile. Wade, you can help get Tribute ready. I've got another colt to look at."

Outside Wade felt the rush of space like a clean, deep breath. He watched Tribute's hooves ahead of him knead the earth as though reluctant to find it still and firm. He was not as big as the stallion, nor was the impact of his personality as powerful, but his lines, the curving neck and long, clean shoulder were so much the same it looked as if they had sprung from the same trunk. But the colt shouldn't be here, Wade thought, somewhere else, he didn't know where, but somewhere else.

Greg crosstied the colt in the shadowed, concrete walkway that divided the barn. Wade started brushing the sleek, gray hide, and Tribute stretched out his head in pleasure. Greg laughed, leaning against the barn to watch.

"You made a friend, Wade. He's kind of touchy about who's around him."

Wade glanced back at Greg. He looked tall because of his thick build, and he moved with the practiced efficiency of a man who had mastered his work thoroughly. Even resting he seemed stiller than most men as though keeping a reserve of strength for the times he would need it. His square face was set off by a sunbleached brown hat under whose brim his eyes moved slowly, thoughtfully from one object to another, one face to another, judging, evaluating.

Wade stopped brushing and pulled at the snarls in Tribute's mane.

"Greg, what makes a hoof crack like that?"

The other was silent a moment, shewing on one fingernail.

"Driness mostly. It happens to a lot of them. This one pounds hell out of the track, too, and those West Coast circuits are murder that way. Fast and hard as a flatiron." He glanced out at the sky. "Sure feel better if it rained." He looked at Wade. "It slows the pace down. He'll run better in the mud with that crack."

Tribute shifted impatiently under the curry brush, worrying his crossties until they were wet and frayed.

A crowd was gathering around them. One or two stable hands had brought their canvas chairs and quietly sat down, careful not to spook the colt.

"Hey, Greg! How you doin', man?" Wade turned to see Eddy shouldering his way through the others. "Ain't that the colt Borodine syndicated? How much is worth?" he asked, leaning against the wall next to Greg.

"Only a million dollars," Greg said.

"He's sure a looker. Hey, Wade. I see they put you to work."

"Watch the kid, Eddy," Greg said. "You can learn something about grooming."

"What you say." Eddy's emaciated shoulders shook with laughter.

"I hear the colt's off his feed since he come back," someone put in.

"Who says that?" Eddy asked.

"And that he's got weak ankles."

"Who says, who says, man? Look at that horse! You gotta be

crazy."

Tribute rossed his head and half-reared. The men moved back uneasily, but Wade reached out and spoke quietly to him.

Eddy straightened. "Say, how long you been running him on a bar shoe?"

Greg shrugged. "A week, maybe more."

Eddy ducked under the tie rope and studied Tribute from the front. Greg looked at him.

"What do you know anyway?" Wade heard him ask. "All you and Tichnor got over there is a bunch of overweight plugs."

Eddy seemed about to say something; his expression changed and he laughed.

"Ain't it the truth? Man, I tell you the boss oughta sell 'em off for glue or stuff 'em in cans. He'd make a pile for sure. Some of them broomtails couldn't beat a fat man with boots on."

"They say Borodine's got backers in the mob," someone put in.

"Who says that?" Eddy asked.

"I read it in a magazine."

"The hell you did. You can't even read." Eddy spat behind him and watched Wade brush the colt's well-muscled hindquarters. "Used to be they'd send their goons to work a jock over or maybe dope up a horse. Now they get their money in nice and legit." He spat again. "Some owners is clean, though. Ain't that right, Greg?"

"Sure," Greg said. Wade studied the groom's face for something more than the single word and saw only a tight, humorless smile. It made him think of his father, the way he felt about his brothers.

Someone spoke up from the crowd. "You show me an owner who ain't made his money with the mob and you can see my ass for free."

"What do we want to do that for?" Eddy asked. "We can hear it talking now."

Tribute snorted angrily as their laughter rolled around him. "Look out--look out there!" Eddy called. The colt kicked viciously, scattering the crowd behind him and narrowly missing Wade. The boy touched the slippery gray neck, already damp with sweat. Tribute dropped his head against Wade's chest and shoved at him.

McKenna came through the crowd and Wade talked quietly to the colt while McKenna studied the injured hoof. The mid-morning sun bore down on the barn and barren ground outside the walkway, and Wade could see a fine sheen of sweat on McKenna's forehead.

The man looked up at Greg. "Remember what I said, just breeze him around. Wade and me will be in the stands with the timers. Just bring him over when you're ready."

Greg smiled and slapped the colt's shoulder, jerking his hand back from Tribute's bared teeth. "He's ready now. Bobby's going to have his hands full."

Wade followed McKenna across the parking lot to the club house where the smell of sweet rolls and coffee reminded the boy that he was hungry: but McKenna passed the restaurant without looking in, passed the white benches propped against the club house wall where jockey agents, idle for the time, played poke with the same intensity they used when hustling rides for their boys. McKenna spoke to one of them sitting by the tunnel entrance.

"How's it going, Frank?"

Wade saw a small, ruddy-faced man with a dark mustache and a shadow of beard along his jaw glance up, squinting at the sun. He looked at his cards, then threw them down in disgust.

"Missed a ride for my boy yesterday by a hair, just by a hair. It would have been forty thousand dollars."

McKenna shook his head and whistled softly.

"Man, that's rough."

Frank tossed his cards to the dealer.

"Can't even get a decent poker hand. Seems like when you miss in one place, you miss all down the line."

McKenna shook his head and walked on through the tunnel where the track waited at the other end. Wade had to walk behind him to let the horses pass through the tunnel-way.

"Yeah, sometimes it works that way," he heard McKenna saying. "You miss once, you missed all down the line. You get settled in something, Wade, and make sure you want it damned bad."

Wade glanced behind him at the paddock and beyond to the special train bringing suburbanites to the track six days a week, up and back starting at one.

The rail birds were already beginning to line up along the white steel fence above the track, and beneath their feet paper cups and betting cards had the brown look of afternoon. The first race was still hours away.

Looking up against the sun Wade could see three men in street clothes sitting in the shade of the bleachers. A board hidden beneath

papers and a row of stop watches covered their knees. Now and then one of the men would punch a watch, mark down the time, then pick up his binoculars and follow another horse around the mile track.

Wade sat with McKenna in back of the men. McKenna picked up one of the track newspapers thrown over the bench.

"Here's where you find the workout schedule. Say a colt is down for a breeze." McKenna craned his neck to look at the tunnel where a bay colt was led out onto the track. Wade, watching the horses on the long oval below them, found it hard to catch all that McKenna was saying.

"Well, you look him up here and find his time. Say he's done a breeze in two thirty-one before, which would be real slow..." He glanced at the tunnel again, his hands folding the newspaper as Wade was trying to read it.

"The timers now, they have a real job. They got to clock all the horses on the track, sometimes as many as eight or ten at a time." His newspaper dropped to the seat below them.

It was getting very hot and stuffy, and Wade took off his light jacket. He noticed that McKenna's hands were sweating.

"How long can you run a colt on a bar shoe?" Wade asked.

"Oh, it'll hold." McKenna's voice was vague. He glanced up at the hot, clear sky. "Damn, why doesn't it rain?"

Tribute came out of the tunnel, snubbed to a spotted lead pony that Greg was riding. Some of the men around Wade drifted down for a better look. As the colt stepped out of the tunnel shadow the boy could see that he was sweating heavily, lather white where the reins

rubbed. Bobby was having trouble keeping his hands down on the colt's withers. McKenna had told Wade that once a rider's hands went up, the horse was gone. Greg swung Tribute in a tight circle to keep him from pitching. They could see the lead pony pulled away from the colt.

"You got him, Bobby?" someone along the rail shouted.

McKenna flinched as the colt jumped at the sound. His smile was gone and his features contracted and gray as he watched Tribute move in front of him. Wade leaned forward, his hands digging into the wooden seat.

Tribute pranced sideways and struck out at the lead pony, then gathered himself as though sitting down, all curves now, the neck arched like a bow. Bobby chirruped softly, his small face ashen but determined as he strained against the tight, collected power under him. After a moment the colt relaxed and followed Greg. Bobby flashed a grin at the railing.

"I got him."

The two horses walked around the near turn, Tribute still dancing beside the lead pony. When they passed the starting gate, Greg turned the colt loose. Wade saw Bobby rise in the stirrups and lift the reins slightly. Tribute broke into a slow, smooth canter. His long legs reached out and swept the track beneath him so evenly it seemed he floated after every lightning-like flick of his hooves thrusting deep into the soft track and launching him forward again.

One of the timers had punched a watch. McKenna punched his and the second hand matched its numbered ticks with the colt's stride. Binoculars winked along the rail as the sunlight poured over the grand-

stand and struck the track below. Wade could see Tribute passing slower horses down the far straightaway, his iron-gray shape blocked now and then by a lead horse and colt.

McKenna had rubbed his knee until a damp patch appeared, and he kept on rubbing it, and the patch widened, became darker.

"Hold him in, hold him in, Bobby," he said over and over, but Wade didn't hear him; he could see Tribute's stride had broken, and when they came around the far turn, the colt leaped, twisted half around and landed with a stiff-legged jar that nearly wrenched Bobby out of the saddle.

"Christ!" McKenna was on his feet.

Down on the track other riders turned, looking back at the colt. Wade was aware of someone shouting, of the crowd that pushed along the fence, straining to see, and inside him he was saying, Throw him, throw him!

Bobby's arm worked furiously with the whip, and Tribute backed into the railing, then lunged forward trying to get his head down with Bobby hauling back on the reins until Tribute reared again and pawed at the air as though to get a foothold on some impossible height. Bobby lost the whip, beat the colt's neck with his cap to get the straining, iron-gray head down and keep them from going over backwards; and still the colt rose higher and higher until he was almost a straight, taut line from muzzle to hock, trembling. They could see Bobby cling precariously to the colt's back. He had lost a stirrup, found it again, stopped beating the colt even with his cap as if in surrender to something primitive and implacable when suddenly Tribute dropped back on all

fours, bucked a few times across the track, then straightened out, and with a baffled toss of his head rocked forward into a canter.

McKenna sat down. His shirt clung wetly to him, but he didn't notice, intent upon the colt who passed at an easy lope under the finish wire.

"Two forty and two fifths," the timer said. "You want to check that, Carl?"

McKenna shook his head.

Wade felt a dull pain in his hands and looked down to find his fingernails had dug little crescents in his palms. The pain was like a consolation against defeat.

Tribute was blowing lightly in the paddock, and the reek of sweat and wet leather hung over him in the hot morning air. Part of the early crowd had followed them to the paddock and stood outside its fence, fanning themselves with newspapers and betting cards. The men in the paddock kept a respectful distance. They don't have to, Wade thought. He doesn't care who touches him now.

McKenna cradled the injured hoof between his knees and felt the tendons in the ankle and fetlock. Wade held the colt's bridle, trying not to see the eyes that no longer held their fierce, direct stare but seemed fixed on something distant. Greg knelt down and ran his hard, calloused hands along the cannon bone and muscled forearm of Tribute's leg. Behind him Bobby shifted anxiously, wiping the sweat off his upper lip.

"Jesus, Greg, he just went right out from under me. Is he hurt? I couldn't get him going; I beat hell out of him. Did he hurt his leg?"

Greg's voice reached only McKenna and Wade.

"Why don't you lay him off? To hell with Borodine."

"It'll hold," McKenna said, staring not at Greg nor at the colt, not at anything Wade could see.

Greg shrugged angrily and led the colt back toward the barn. The crowd moved back, but Tribute did not even look at them.

"Come on, Wade," McKenna said, and he reached out to put his arm around the boy's shoulders.

Wade was not there. With a quick, sinuous movement he had sidestepped McKenna's outstretched arm and stood facing him.

"What's the matter, son?" McKenna asked.

Wade said nothing. He stared at the man's wide, uncomprehending eyes and his stocky awkward body frozen with astonishment. After a moment the boy turned and fell in step beside him.

"This colt reminds me of Assault," McKenna said. "He stepped on a stake once and about lamed himself for good, but would he quit? Came out of the gate fighting like a gamecock every time. Went on to take the Triple Crown. He was a great horse."

Wade said nothing. Overhead the sky spread out hot and blue, and they walked into sunlight that seemed to hammer the dry ground until it shuddered in the distance behind breathless, heated air.

McKenna was talking again but Wade didn't hear him, feeling inside himself a battle going on, raging like a colt against too long a restraint, fighting in a war where there could be no submission and no forgiveness.

"Why doesn't it rain?" McKenna said.

CHAPTER XII

Chuck was home when Wade got back. The university had changed to the quarter system, letting him out at the end of April. It wasn't until noon that Wade got a chance to talk to his father as they sat down to eat. Chuck and Rob were deep in a discussion of the research project Chuck was working on.

"Can't you two talk about something else?" his mother said. "I can't follow half of what you're saying. Wade, sit up straight. You look like an old man sitting hunched over that way."

"The project director is really hot about this new compound," Chuck was saying. "It kills twenty varieties of corn and cotton weevils, and they're thinking of using it in the timber regions, because it kills certain larvae almost on contact. Think of what that could mean. The director figured twenty-five per cent cut in losses due to insects."

"Maybe they'd give us a break in timber prices for once, unless the government has subsidized that, too."

"Dad," Wade said, "about the race track this morning."

"How was it?" Rob asked. He turned to Chuck. "Wade went with Carl McKenna to Arlington. Pass the butter, Kay."

"Dad, I've been thinking," Wade said.

"The only thing about this compound is the DDT," Chuck said. "We use a high proportion of it, and they've found that fish pick it up when they feed off vegetation that's been contaminated. Salmon especially. The safety level is three parts per million, and the salmon they've

analyzed have contained up to twenty-two parts per million. That means other things, animals, plants, pick it up, too. We'll have to iron it out before it can be commercialized."

"Sounds damn good to me; sure hope you can work it out."

"And another thing--they found some bird feeds off the larvae. When all the larvae are gone, the bird leaves, flocks of them. That wouldn't be so bad, only that same bird feeds off other insects like gnats and mostquitoes--and with nothing around to check them, those damn insects are multiplying like rabbits. Hell, it's a lot more complicated than I ever thought it would be."

"Dad," Wade said.

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about raising race horses--"

"Did McKenna show you around?"

"Yes, I saw just about everything."

"And?"

At last, he had their full attention. He gripped his table knife and met his father's eyes. The phone rang.

"I've decided I don't want to race horses."

"What? Just a minute, Wade."

Wade sighed and glanced at his mother. She was watching Rob as he picked up the hall phone. Wade glared at Chuck. He felt as though he were fighting a fog that would retreat in front of him, but when he stopped beating it back and stood still, it closed around him again, silent, suffocating in its formlessness.

"Hello?" his father was shouting. "Hello? Eric! What? Yes,

yes everybody's here. Yes, Kay, come here and talk to him."

They all spoke to Eric and Jim briefly, and then Eric asked to talk to Rob alone.

Wade thought his uncle's voice sounded strange, because it was and it wasn't like his father's. They had the same deepness and slightly nasal sound, but there was something nervous in his uncle's tone, a tone Wade didn't like to hear.

Chuck, Kay and Wade stayed in the kitchen while Rob talked, having drawn a chair up by the phone. The three of them tried to keep up a conversation so as not to appear to eavesdrop, but after a short while they gave up and fell silent.

"Yes, Eric, I got your letters. I don't know, you never said what your investment was. Yes, I know, I know things have been hard."

There was a long pause, and his father's face became strangely pale, the blue eyes staring blindly at the floor.

"How much would you need?"

The answer made him rub his face slowly, and Wade saw, for just a moment, the anguish and pity in his father's eyes.

"When would you need it?"

He nodded, then gestured to Kay for paper and pencil, then began figuring rapidly.

"Ten thousand," he said, "less fifteen percent commission for the realtor, say, a week, add another day for wire service. Yes, I'll have it to you by the thirtieth. What's today?" he asked Kay.

"The tenth."

"Yes, I'll have it to you." Wade saw the hand around the pencil

tighten until he thought the pencil would break. "Yes, Eric, yes I know this is the last time. Yes. By the thirtieth. It'll be there."

He hung up and threw the pencil down.

"Well, that's the last of that," he said harshly.

"Ten thousand dollars," Chuck said in awe. "What did he do?"

Kay slipped her arms around his neck. "Oh, Rob, I'm sorry."

Wade thought it strange that what she had wanted for so long now meant little at all to her.

"Those damned fools," Rob said, "the two of them and their idiot wives. They tried to open a clothing store, a clothing store for God's sake! Eric never knew enough to weak black socks with a blue suit. God damn the both of them. Looking back to what they ran out on to save them."

He got up, not even feeling Kay's slender arms fall away. He went to the sink and started washing his hands.

"They sank all they had into the store--kept nothing out, not a Goddmaned penny, and lost it all. Some big chain store went in up the block. They didn't even investigate the business district, didn't know where their customers were coming from--just jumped into it because somebody told them it would make a fortune. Came out busted flat. And they knew, they knew they were in trouble five months ago and didn't pull out then. Where the hell do they think they're living--some kind of fairy land? Well, this is it, they've got all I can give. There's nothing more for the next time; they'll never be anything more."

"Rob," Kay said.

"I'm going for a walk." The front door slammed behind him.

Later that night his father said bitterly to him, "Hazard land, Wade. You're standing on all that's left of it."

Wade thought about the pain behind the words. His father was alive that way, to owning things. They meant a great deal to him.

Would Chuck be that way? He was already beginning to sound like an expert, like the men at the lumber yard on Saturdays. One of these days he would get married, too. Maybe he would work for a chemical company. Wade turned over in his bed, restlessly, driven by an anger he couldn't understand or name. I don't want that. His fist made a dark hole in his pillow. I don't want it.

CHAPTER XIII

The ravine was filled with natural hollows now that its leaves had come out. Wade and Ralph spent most of their time fixing up their camp, camouflaging the entrance with branches, building a stone-lined campfire in the center and sweeping the ground inside clean, laying two old blankets around the fire that Ralph had taken from his mother's attic. "She never uses them anyway," Ralph said.

He had grown nearly four inches in the last six months and stood almost level with Wade. He was beginning to look awkward. Wade had not grown as much, but he noticed that his shirts were harder to fit, and his pants crept to the top of his socks too often. His body seemed harder, more fit, and he could take the whole distance from his house to the ravine in one run, nearly a mile and a half.

He moved differently when away from the house; it seemed as if a veil dropped and he became really himself, as if his head emptied and the ravine poured into it, working on him until he knew every sound and sight with the familiarity of one born there.

Ralph brought cigarettes and they smoked, but Wade didn't like it. The smell was too sharp and pungent and drove away everything except themselves. He kept even the campfires low, burning only dry wood to make sure there was little smoke.

They tried laying snares for rabbits, but couldn't get them set right, and the rabbits tripped them, getting away with the bait.

"Why don't I bring my twenty-two?" Ralph said. "We could pick

off one or two real easy."

"Not here. Somebody might hear us if we started shooting."

"Who? There ain't anybody around for miles, for Christ's sake."

"I don't know. Somebody might, that's all. Besides, it's nothing to kill a rabbit with a gun. We've got to do it another way. A quieter way."

"Why? We've laid fifteen traps and not one of 'em has worked." Ralph tossed the last snare in front of Wade as proof.

"I don't know why. We just got to do it that way is all."

"You gonna skin one if we catch it?"

"I don't know how. I saw my dad skin a squirrel once, but that was a long time ago. I don't know how to skin a rabbit."

"Well, neither do I."

Wade stared down at the snare. They considered the question in silence for a moment, then Ralph asked.

"Well, what do we want to catch one for, then?"

Wade glanced up at Ralph. "I don't know. Eat it maybe?" He made a face at his own suggestion and Ralph spat in the grass.

Wade stirred the snare with his toe as if it was still armed.

"Maybe we better give up on traps and stuff."

"How else are we going to catch one? We ain't got a dog. A good dog would get us one in nothing flat. Billy's got one. A coon hound, he said. Maybe we could get Billy to come out here."

"He runs around with Jerry. I thought you said you didn't go with those creeps any more."

"Jesus, just to get his dâg. He can't do nothing to this place."

All right, forget I said it! You tell me how we're going to get us a rabbit--run it down ourselves?"

"I'll work on it. Just leave the rest of them out of this."

There's no one to teach me, he thought. How can I understand what I'm supposed to do? They had made a home out of the ravine, but something was wrong.

The knife at his side seemed to invest him with a responsibility altogether different from any that he had had before. He felt no need of having to decide about his life, that in some way it was deciding for him, directing and shaping him. More and more he spent his time at the ravine, sometimes with Ralph, at times alone.

There he felt a beginning, something moving toward completion that had been left out everywhere else. He did not miss home when away from it. Ralph was always running off when it began to get dark, worrying about what his mother would say, what he would eat, sometimes not showing up at all if it rained or looked like rain.

If Wade wanted to go anywhere if was in the opposite direction from home, it was farther yet, beyond the ground he had already covered and that was becoming too familiar to him.

One afternoon, something made him stop at the crest of the hill and listen. Clouds drifted above him in the blue air, the sun shooting obliquely through their swollen depths and fanning out to the earth below. He stood very still, nostrils expanding as the wind brushed past his face, cooling sweat on his body.

Three starlings burst from the ravine, scolding in their rusty, harsh cries. At the same time he heard what he should have known he

would hear, should have expected all along, the mournful, drawn-out bay of a dog, rising to hysterical pitch and seeming to circle back on itself. He heard a heavy crashing through the brush and Billy's voice yelling, "There's one, there he goes! Ralph, dammit, head him off!"

Wade turned and headed back for home. All this time he had thought Ralph understood. Why didn't he feel it, the wildness, the wild blood?

He glanced up at the sky, at the sunlight's changing gold, felt the short sumac twigs sting his ankles, the knife hugging his waist, all of it part of something that drove him toward a knowledge he had thought to share and now felt must be wrong since he alone could feel it. Why had it chosen him?

ii

That night his parents and Chuck went to a city council meeting hearing testimony from all concerned citizens about a proposed fluoridation project. Wade was glad to hear the auditorium bond had passed; now his mother was fighting for the additive to the water. He wondered why she felt such things were part of her life, just as he and his father and Chuck were part of her life. He thought she was the most civilized person he knew, and often he wondered how she could have given birth to himself. He loved her; he supposed he did. His father was different. Lately he had become even more exacting and harsh, working later at the yard, leaving early. Meals had become something Wade dreaded. Sitting next to his father when he was like that was like

being near a high voltage wire about to break.

He stared out the window at the darkness. It was a warm night. He could hear traffic on the highway like a steady hiss. His parents would be gone until well past midnight.

Wade hesitated a moment, struggling with his fear of the dark, then turned out some of the lights he had switched on, and slipped out the door.

He kept to the backyards along his street, looking in at the houses, the silent televisions and in one of them a girl snapping her fingers and dancing to a tune he couldn't hear.

Darkness was another world, he thought. When the light went out what was there went out, too, and something else came to take its place, something with only sound and a kind of feeling to it.

Lights from the highway blotted out what was between himself and the road, making it seem as if a black hole had opened before him and reappeared behind so that he was walking on an illusion of a road. He kept looking at the unlighted distance beyond the school where he wanted to go but couldn't. Maybe Ralph would go with him. They could go out to the ravine.

Always with him, a silent but eloquent breath from that darkness kept pace with his feet as they changed to a lope, running effortlessly along the highway, it circled around him and his heart answered, or tried to.

Ralph's house was dark in front. Wade left the highway and circled around from the rear, moving slowly and staying in the shadows. He moved as he wanted, now, as a cat with the muscles tense and controlled.

There was a dim light on in one rear window, Alvina bedroom Wade's guessed from the few times he had been in Ralph's house. The curtains were drawn tightly, a dark streak down the center when one overlapped the other. A large elm tree, black and flat against the light, arched over the house, casting a vague shadow out across the lawn. Shading his eyes against the highway lights, Wade could see the back porch and Ralph's bike leaning against a gray, sagging rail.

Wade moved closer, throwing his body against the damp earth, listening to the night sounds around him. He crept into the elm's shadow and saw someone standing on a box, head almost level with the lighted bedroom window.

Careful to step only where bare ground showed through, he worked his way up to the tree. It was Ralph standing on the box. His body was so still he seemed to have stopped breathing. Now Wade could hear a subtle, distant murmur of voices. His own voice was a whisper that floated across the yard and seemed to be the darkness itself.

"Ralph?"

Ralph's head whipped around almost throwing himself off the box. Then he was running toward the field beyond Wade, head down, arms pumping frantically. Wade tackled him as he ran past. Ralph struck out at him, breathing harshly like a trapped animal.

"Jerry!" his hoarse whisper reached Wade. "Let me go, let me go!"

"It's me, Wade." His voice was half-choked as he ducked his head to avoid the blows falling blindly against him.

"Wade? Is that you, Wade?"

"Yes." He sat up, letting Ralph go.

He brushed the dirt and grass off his clothes. His right elbow

hurt and there was a long scrap on his shin. Ralph looked at him.

"You won't tell, will you, Wade?"

Wade stood up, looking back at the house.

"Is that what Jerry knows?"

Ralph nodded. He sniffed loudly and wiped his sleeve across his nose.

"They told me to get out," he said. "I'm supposed to be at your house. You won't tell, will you? You won't tell?"

"Is Pat Buckner in there?"

Ralph's head was sunk on his knees and his arms propped on either side.

"Yes," he said hollowly.

Wade started back toward the house. Ralph's head jerk up.

"Where are you going?"

Wade turned but said nothing. After a moment the other got up and walked beside him in silence, punctuated now and then with a loud sniff.

"How did Jerry find out?"

"He knows some guy that hangs around with Pat. Pat didn't tell this guy, he just kind of guessed."

They had reached the box. He glanced at Ralph. Curiosity and a fascination for the forbidden was eating up the boy's fear as it was in himself. Almost in one movement both were on the box, balancing their weight carefully.

There was a chink of light underneath the window sill. By lowering their heads slightly Wade and Ralph could see into the room.

The first thing he saw was Pat Buckner's head and shoulders propped against the bedstead. He was staring at something in the corner. Light blue wallpaper covered the space behind him. The table lamps on either side of the bed were white milkglass, and an old dresser stood near the bed, nylon stockings hanging out of the top drawer.

Suddenly a white form blotted out the room, then passed in front of them. Ralph's mother had on a thin nylon robe. She was naked underneath and her small, but firm breasts rounded out the cloth into twin half-circles of shadow. Alvina sat on the bed, pulling at her robe nervously. Pat's hand rested on her arm.

"Hey," they heard his voice soft, bantering. "What's wrong?"

Alvina stood up. There was a stillness, a gravity to her face that made her seem older, less sure of herself.

"I don't know. Hand me a cigarette, will you?"

She blew the smoke out quickly. Pat sank back to watch her.

"It's Ralph."

"What about Ralph?"

She waved her hand helplessly. "I don't know. I get to thinking sometimes."

"About what?"

"Oh...he's getting around to that age and all." She turned to look at Pat. The robe clung to her shoulders and buttocks, cupping underneath with a neat blue shadow. Wade watched, fascinated by the swift changes in the folds of cloth, the way they followed the body's movements, shaped the woman's flesh that bobbed and swayed, looser than when dressed for the day.

"I don't know what them other kids are saying to him, you know, about sex and all," Alvina said. "I don't want him to think--Pat, you suppose he thinks I'm whoring around?"

"Well, thanks a hell of a lot. I don't lay every broad I talk to." He grabbed at her waist, but she stepped back.

"Don't. Listen. Maybe I ain't always done everything I should, but I always tried to keep things honest between Ralph and me. Maybe you could take him with you sometime, talk to him or something. Pat, I really care what he thinks about me, really I do. I'm not a bitch. Couldn't you take him on a short haul and tell him how things are with us?"

"Hell, no. If I'm going to tell him anything it'll be with you standing there. Come here." She sat on the bed beside him. "How old is Ralph--twelve, thirteen?"

"Thirteen."

"Wait two years. Then you'll have something to worry about. Now, get rid of that cigarette."

"Is that all you can think about? I'm trying to raise a boy right--"

"Boys raise themselves--the ones worth a plugged nickel anyway. Come on, dammit. What do I have to do--kill a cock to get a chicken?"

Alvina smiled, a tight smile as if against her will. Wade and Ralph watched, fascinated, as Pat slid his hand into the robe. They couldn't see what he was doing. Alvina's head lifted back, the hair falling straight between her shoulder blades. Pat tossed the robe over her shoulders. The next thing Wade knew the room was dark.

He stepped off the box and stared out at the dark field. His

heart was pounding so hard he thought it would burst in his veins. He started to say something, had to clear his throat, then whispered up to Ralph.

"Let's go to my house. Nobody's there." His voice sounded funny.

"Okay," Ralph whispered back.

They walked across the field in silence, glancing back at the house now and then. Wade's stomach felt tight and there was a funny feeling in the small of his back and his legs, a weakness and trembling. He could have run a mile in one burst.

They were half-way across the field when Ralph started to giggle. Wade looked at him, grinning, and laughed, infected by a hilarity that seemed to come from deep inside him. They started laughing and couldn't stop, collapsing weakly on the warm, damp ground, laughing until Wade thought his muscles were paralyzed and he would never be able to breath again. Ralph kept hooting, smacking his knee with the flat of his hand.

When they had settled into weak, intermittant giggles, Ralph turned to Wade who lay exhausted on the ground beside him, his face against the deep grass.

"You know..." he panted, "you know what...Pat said he couldn't stand?"

"What?"

"Flabby boobs."

Wade flopped over on his back, curled up like a puppy, and howled with pain and laughter.

"Not...not only that," Ralph wheezed, "but one's...higher than the other."

"Stop! Oh, God, stop!"

Wade laughed until he felt sick, then forced himself to breathe slowly, deeply.

At last they lay quiet, sighing now and then, staring back at the house. The darkness, driven back for a moment by the noise, settled over them quietly. They heard trucks gearing up on the highway, the sound like someone clearing his throat.

"Hey, Ralph."

"Yeah?"

"How come it's so funny?"

Ralph chuckled a little, then stopped. He rolled over on his stomach, folding his arms under his head.

"I don't know."

Wade thought about Pat's hand sliding into Alvina's robe. When he imagined them as his own mother and father, it wasn't funny then. Hands, his own hand on the stallion's halter, on invisible reins, what power was it linking them? Who ruled what? He thought about the ravine, and couldn't quite escape the idea that what attracted him to the night was at heart some kind of evil. It led him to spy on people; it led him away from home. And the knife, yes, it led to that, too. Yet he had felt it so strong, something he had thought was good.

"Wade."

"What?"

"I didn't mean to tell Billy about our place. It just kind of slipped out."

Wade pulled up a sour weed and sucked on the bottom of it. Ralph raised his head to look at him.

"I just wanted to catch a rabbit, that's all. I just wanted to use his dog." His head sunk down on his arms again. "I didn't know he was going to bring Redquist and the rest of them, honest I didn't!"

In the darkness they could hear frogs trilling. The long, drawn-out horn of a train drifted on the warm air. Wade turned toward the sound. There was something more. Out there a voice, he thought, mine before the one I have now. He bit the weed in half and spat it out.

"You want to go there tonight?" he asked Ralph.

"Where?"

"The ravine. I know the way. We could find it without any light."

"Wade," he heard Ralph start sniffing again, "they busted it up."

"What?" Wade stood up, rage like a snarl in the back of his throat.

"I tried to stop them, Redquist started it. They just busted up everything...the campfire, the bushes, everything. I'm sorry, Wade. I tried to stop them."

Everytime he got close to something they killed it. Why, dammit, why?

"I'm sorry, Wade."

Wade looked down at Ralph.

"What do they do at Harris's?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Answer me."

"It's the cows," Ralph said. "I found out one time when I went back to see if maybe Harris hadn't got another horse. I saw them in the pasture with this cow, and they were...well, you know. Redquist said he's spread it around about ma if I told anybody."

Ralph's eyes in the dark were soft and helpless.

"You ain't going to tell on them, are you?"

"No. I'll think of something."

"Are you going back to the ravine? I'll go with you if you... want. Maybe we can fix it up."

"What for?"

Ralph didn't answer.

For the first time Wade felt the tightness and anger ease out of him, and something like relief, a strange gladness wash through his body. This time he was on his own ground, supported, protected by what had waited for and recognized him. Ralph was no longer in that, would never be in that. Redquist, Harris, it was all part of something else as Ralph and a two-story house were part of something else.

Make the camp as it had been?

"What for?" he said again.

CHAPTER XIV

But he did go back, alone this time.

The ravine had been torn apart; the camped looked as if a violent storm had been frozen in the act of destroying. Wade turned over the broken branches, clearing away some of the rubble, and straightened the stones where he and Ralph had made their fire. But it was only to give his hands something to do, like a preparation for burial.

He came to the crest of the hill, and for a long moment stood motionless, letting the warm sun spill over his face and shoulders. He didn't need to look back at the ravine, having seen in the senseless violence his liberation.

ii

The last day of school they had the annual picnic with three schools, north, south and central, competing in the athletic events held before the picnic started. Ralph took the fifty-yard dash and Wade the quarter mile run to give north first place in the competition. Redquist and three other boys were not there, but no one had expected them to come, and the picnic ended with only three fights having broken out.

Wade saw Jeffers before leaving. The man was cleaning out his desk as Wade came to his office door. Jeffers paused, one hand holding a sheaf of papers he had been about to stuff in his light brown briefcase. There were no chairs in the room; it was to be mopped out when

Jeffers left. Wade saw little black circles scratched in the floor where his swivel chair had been pushed back and forth. A few feet away there were other scratches where Wade's feet had dragged while Jeffers had explained verb conjugations and subordinate clauses. It seemed funny to think of that now.

"Well, Wade," Jeffers said. His eyes rested on the boy's face.

"I just wanted to say, well, you've helped me a lot this year. I guess I wouldn't have made it without that." But he hadn't wanted to say that at all. It seemed he could never really get into words things that meant a great deal to him.

Jeffers put the papers in a side flap of the briefcase and gathered the last stack together.

"I've enjoyed it, Wade. You have a good mind." The boy suddenly felt that that was not what Jeffers had wanted to say, either.

"Well, I guess I'll see you next year."

"No. I'm going to Harvard. Illinois, that is. I've been offered a teaching job in the high school there."

"Oh." Wade stuck his hands in his pockets. Suddenly something, all the vague feelings running through him seemed to coalesce into a clear, simple idea.

"Is it what you want? You ought to have what you want, Mr. Jeffers."

Jeffers looked at him silently, then smiled.

"Yes, I think so. What about you, Wade?"

"Sure..."

"I guess."

They laughed and Jeffers stuck out his hand. Wade took it hesi-

tantly.

"Keep in touch, Wade."

"Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"And say hello to your parents for me."

Wade's eyes met his, and the boy felt the quiet, unblinking gaze look not at him but through him, into him as though seeing there an apparition still alive within the man himself.

Then the large, rough hand released his own, and Wade left.

He walked home slowly, reluctant to get there at all. His father did not seem to like him anymore. There was no talk about horses now or responsibility or facing the future; there was nothing but silence, at meals, when they worked in the lumber yard, when they drove in the car. It seemed they had nothing in common; even Chuck had less to say to his father. Wade spent as little time at home as possible.

But outside it was different. In the sunsets spread like flaming wings across the sky and in the deep blackness of night when he looked up and felt in the awe and terror that sight always instilled within him the secret images of his life, then he seemed closer to what had begun like a dream and now beat next to him like another heart; now infinity, now the interior of himself, the two slowly blending as though cords of dangerous voltage were coming closer together. The power latent there ran through him, restless, demanding. He always wore the knife when he went out now.

He got away from the house after dinner when the sun was nearly at the horizon's edge where it hung huge and red, lingering as though unwilling to see night come. Wade started off toward Harris's woods,

his mother's voice calling after him not to stay out too late.

The woods were quiet but for the sounds of insects whining around his ears. The leaves were dark green, almost black in the failing light and seemed tactile as flesh. He stalked along the trail, feeling as always in the summer twilight a sense of unreality; nothing really penetrating, but all of it closing around him like an insinuation of color and form. Sometimes he could not hear his footsteps, and it gave him a sense of incorporality, only the cool evening vapor on his skin outlining his body.

It was so different from the fall, the clean, metallic odor gone and in its place too rich, too heavy a fragrance, the growth around him too thick, but when he came to the clearing nothing had changed. He started to work his way toward the far end of the pasture, and caught himself listening for the stallion. The cows were in the pasture now, their black and white shapes moving with an awkward, double-jointed step. Their legs were caked with mud and dung, the stench repulsive and attractive both. One of the cows turned as he passed and moaned softly at the woods. Wade hid in the tall, thick shrubs a few yards back of the fence. Mosquitoes and gnats lit on his arms and neck, brushing his skin as though finding it as smooth and impenetrable as the leaves.

He stared out at the farm, feeling that the stallion's loss had halted its decay but taken from it also all hope. The twilight deepened until the west turned a smokey gray-pink and the cows in front of him seemed like black and white patches moving softly in the grass.

Redquist and three others came out of the woods toward him. He

saw they were a little drunk. One of them had an empty bottle and kept tipping it against his mouth as if a stubborn drop refused to come out. Wade found a rock the size of a hardball, and he held it tightly, waiting.

Two of the boys slipped under the fence and caught one of the cows. They led her over to where a large stone jutted out of the grass. One of the boys Wade recognized as Billy was holding her head. The cow lifted her nose and moaned softly again, her large eyes rolling white, the bovine head somehow sweet with a docility that seemed part victim, part vanquisher. Billy was murmuring something to her that made the other boys laugh. They were all under the fence, now, Redquist unzipping his pants. The other two had, also, looking down, their backs to Wade, comparing. One of them said something; the other laughed.

"Well, jack it," he said.

Wade waited until Jerry had stepped on the stone. There was a fine, light sweat all over his body like a damp hand on his back and face and between his legs. Wade was so tense his hand trembled around the rock. When Jerry lifted the tail and moved in on the cow, Wade flung the rock as hard as he could.

iii

"Why the hell did you do that?" Rob said to Wade. "I told you to stack the feed over by the window." He was leaning on the counter, calculating the morning's receipts; they were not large. Wade picked up the feed sacks and started over to the window.

He heard the front door ring and glanced up to see Ed Berkley

come in. He was short and broad, his face burned red even this early in the summer, with eyelashes so pale they made his lids look as if they were stretched wider than normal, giving his eyes a dull, staring cast. His overalls had been washed white at the seams and rubbed so thin at the knees they fit snugly over the bone beneath. Everything seemed to fit him too tightly as though he were being squeezed.

"Afternoon, Rob."

"Ed."

"Hotter than the devil's frying pan out there."

"What can I do you for?"

"Well, I got my cultivator around back. Busted the damn shaft on it and was wondering if you'd fix me up with a new one. Fella over to Woodstock ain't open."

"It'll take awhile. Tom can do it," Rob said.

Berkley shrugged. "I got time."

Rob called Tom Andrews in from the warehouse and told him to load the cultivator on the outside ramp and fix a shaft. Berkley eased himself down on one of the stools that surrounded the counter.

"Heard the damndest story from Harris the other day."

"Oh?"

Wade felt his face get hot. He concentrated on stacking the feed, glancing at Berkley from the corner of his eye.

"Where did you see him?" Rob asked.

"I went over to check about some dairy stock. He told some fella he might sell off the herd. Seems somebody in Woodstock has a law suit going against him. Even if they don't collect, he says it's going to

eat up that farm just to pay lawyer and court costs."

"What's the story he told you?"

Berkley rubbed his ear and chuckled slyly, glancing at Wade's father the way Pat had looked at Wade in the diner.

"Seems this bunch of kids about fifteen, sixteen been diddling his stock. He says he don't mind as long as they don't hurt none of them. Well," he chuckled again, pulling at his nose, "night before last they was out doing it again. Only this time, Harris says, just at this one kid starts to give it to the cow, something happens."

Wade could see his father grinning now, leaning forward so that his shirt stretched tight across his shoulders where the muscles lay flat and hard.

"The cow jumps and lets fly with a hind leg and catches this kid in the shin. Harris don't know if the boy hurt her or what; anyway the kid up and kicks her in the ass. Damned if the next thing Harris didn't see was that boy dragging along behind her by one foot and the cow bellering like a banshee it hurt her so bad."

Rob smacked the countertop, roaring and shaking his head. Berkley's face was a deep crimson and his chuckle like a steady stream of hickups.

"The kid finally bounces loose and mad? Harris said he could hear him clear to the house, cussing that old cow out for every kind of whore since Jezebel."

Wade's father was wiping his eyes, still laughing.

"God, Ed, I'd have given a hundred dollars to have seen that."

"Yeah. Well, Harris goes out to check on the cow, and the kids beat the hell out of the pasture. Harris said he yelled after him, the

one who was leading these boys, not to bother with his stock anymore. He says the cow was a mite sore for a couple of days."

Rob grinned and shook his head.

"Guess at that age they all think they're one hell of a stud."

"Bull, you mean," Berkley said.

"So they've got a law suit against Harris? First I've heard about it."

"He sold a stallion to some guy in Woodstock, and the guy got himself killed messing with the horse. They call it some fancy name, what Harris done selling the horse in the first place. If he goes that'll be just me and Henry Ridder left farming around here. And your place."

"Not any more. I'm selling, already sold as of yesterday."

Wade heard the harshness back in his father's voice.

"That a fact?" Berkley said. "Ridder told me something like that, but I thought he'd heard wrong."

"Hell, it's a tax elephant," Rob said, waving his hand as though wiping all of it casually out of his mind. "Who the hell's going to live on it, anyway? Ladd's been after me to sell for five years. Top dollar. I need the money for this place."

Berkley said nothing, staring at the floor.

"Well," he sighed. "Can't blame you. If I didn't have so damn much money sunk in my place, I'd sell out, too, but I wouldn't get a third back on what I put in. It's a hell of a business. Harris says he ain't going to fight it. They want to come and take the place, he'll let 'em, he says. Well, guess that cultivator's about ready."

"You buy any of Harris's stock you better check them over. He

may try and sell you that whore of his."

Berkley laughed. The two of them helped Andrews load the cultivator while Wade watched from the doorway. His father stared at Berkley's truck until it was a small point of blue down the highway; then he turned and came back toward Wade.

All humor had died out of his face, and the look he gave the boy was closed and bitter, almost defensive like that of an angry stranger.

"Dad--"

"Did you get that feed stacked by the window?"

"Yes, sir."

His father said nothing more, walking on ahead, the heavy stamp of his feet raising small puffs of dust. Wade wished he understood what had come between them. He thought about the cow and Redquist and had to smile. What if Redquist found out?

His father was farther ahead of him now. Wade watched his feet rising and falling. It didn't matter, he told himself. But the pain was there all the same.

CHAPTER XV

The night was hot, pressing down on him like a soft, smothering sleeve, and Wade threw the covers off his body. The curtains next to his head hung stiffly, the breeze blowing from the south.

He couldn't get comfortable. Finally he sat up, staring at the blackness beyond his open door. Crickets shrilled below his window and he timed the chirps by his pulse. Fifty chirps in fifteen seconds, add thirty-two. Eighty-two degrees outside. It had to be hotter than that. A hundred and ten at least.

He leaned his head on his knee, listening to the crickets, only after awhile he was listening to something else, for something else. He felt his heart leap in answer, and he moved slowly out of bed, dressing in the dark.

He strapped the knife on and walked cautiously to his door, but the floorboards that always creaked were silent now. And the stairs, silent under his feet as if he had no weight, no footsteps. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, but there was no sound from the bedrooms above him. The banister under his hand felt sticky as if it needed to be washed.

The moonlight was a pale blue in the livingroom. Its furniture, so passive and inobtrusive in the day seemed to be conscious of him. But he was not afraid. He opened the back door and shut it only half-way so that he would make no noise when he returned.

Outside night closed around him like a protection. Streetlights

seemed to have shrunk timidly from the darkness. Once beyond his own yard he set out at a slow, steady jog northward, all his senses alert, not thinking, becoming part of the night; nostrils flared to catch the scent of damp grass and leaves, of a dog that passed him, swinging wide to clear the path. His skin seemed like another sense, feeling the subtle changes in temperature as he passed cooler spots in the field, warning him when there was a deep roll to the land.

But all his senses seemed directed to a point in the darkness, not at its forms, but at itself; the quest sharpened. He was aware that something was close to him, in the elements, in every living thing not separate but part of himself, the mystery there. He ran crouched slightly, balanced, the alertness he felt taking over his mind until the conscious part seemed to sink as if lending its power to the already formidable power there. Something, he kept searching, expecting something.

Distance was distorted. He did not seem to be going anywhere once beyond the streetlights, only following some impulse that kept pulling him farther and farther away, and it was only when he came to the crest of a hill that he knew where he was.

The ravine loomed black and deep out of the tall sumac around it. The trees stopped the moonlight at the top and darkness seemed to hang from them like moss, tangible, uncanny. He hesitated, still under the strange influence, protection of what had called him, not afraid but excited and eager. His heart beat light and fast as he went down the incline and into the ravine.

The smell, heavy and cloying in its thick sweetness seemed so

much stronger than he remembered, and the sounds of small animals were like the continuous rustling of the ravine in its night restlessness, wandering, searching. Bats flickered across the lighter sky and disappeared as though the heavy leaf cover had swallowed them up.

The darkness was so intense he had to pick up a stick to hold in front of his eyes, pushing stiff, slapping branches back. Cobwebs clung to his neck and face like light, thin fingers and he felt small insects touch his arms, their wings whirring briefly and then gone, touching him again and then gone. He circled that ravine, working his way silently as his eyes tried to pierce the blackness, but at every step he felt what he was looking for was always ahead, always around the next curve or up the side of the ravine. At last he stopped with his back against the rough, cool bark of a tree. He did not understand. What he was looking for did not seem to be here.

A swift, sudden crash in the underbrush made him jerk up and his hand closed on the knife. There was a short squeal, then a sinuous shadow form darted past him, brushing his leg. He didn't move, afraid for the first time, now, that something more than flesh and blood was there luring him into a darkness from which there was no escape.

After the wave of fear ebbed away, he moved slowly to the rim where he had seen or thought he had seen the shadow disappear. The moonlight was bright enough for him to make out the small, thin animal sitting up, turned toward him. It looked like a ferret or weasel. Something dark and still lay beside it. The ferret's eyes blinked like agates, its head darting back and forth as Wade came nearer.

It seemed to the boy that he was dispersed, his body the darkness

and leaves, branches, roots held together only by his concentration on the small animal above him, something like a bright point of light converging behind his eyes until it seemed he looked at the ferret from the opening of a tunnel; and there was nothing between them but his arm and the point of the stick as he cocked back and threw it.

The animal flattened just as the point knifed above him, and Wade heard the stick strike the sumac beyond. Almost at the same time the boy was out of the ravine, but the ferret was gone. It had left behind a rabbit spattered with blood.

He knelt down. The rabbit's fur at the throat was dark and growing darker, a stain spreading over the white bib as the wind stirred it with an illusion of life. He reached out slowly and touched the light hair. It felt cool, and the muscles underneath were limp, almost shapeless. He turned the rabbit over, but he could not feel, could not get close--

His knife cut secretively into the throat and slit down to the anus. Blood spotted his hands. He pulled the skin open and the organs were clearly visible for a moments, the heart and coils of intestine, the shiny surfaces gleaming as though from light within, then blood began to cover it all, staining with its darkness. His hands were dark and sticky. The smell was pungent, bloody, fetid, smell of life and the secret workings of life.

He cut the organs out and lay them in front of him, trying to see it all, to understand, and it seemed that the blood on his hands was the blood of the stallion, too, bequeathing to him this deeper knowledge that he might not be afraid. Around him night pushed its muzzle, poised,

waiting to take what he had laid out and he could feel the pulse of it, the movement flowing through his body, through all of it before him; earth turning in its sleep and stars wheeling with their slow fire overhead, and at the heart of it this, the wild blood in the stallion and now in himself.

A wild, fierce pain and love gripped him, filling his throat, and thickened his tongue until he pressed his hand hard against his mouth where the smell and taste of life and death mingled and his hand seemed to squeeze itself into the knife.

At home he used the outside hose to wash the blood off. The house was warm and stuffy, his room hotter than any other, but he was exhausted and undressing, threw himself naked across the bed. He fell into a deep, unbroken sleep.

ii

The paper landed with a thump against the front door. His father was gargling in the bathroom. Downstairs Chuck was trying to get Kay to make pancakes for breakfast.

"It's Saturday, isn't it?" he said. "We always have pancakes on Saturday."

"Eat. You need eggs."

"I hate eggs. God damn, Chicago had another riot last night. It's says here four blocks burned until early this morning."

Wade heard his father stamping down the stairs, the harsh voice saying,

"Looters--line 'em up against the wall and shoot the whole lot

them. Wade! Get down here."

"Oh, let him sleep a little. He needs it," his mother said.

"Sleep? When I've got inventory to do?"

Wade got out of bed. His clothes were draped over the chair where he had thrown them, but he left them there and slipped into a clean pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt.

He felt depressed and angry; night seemed so long ago. He bunched his still-damp jeans and shirt against his face, smelling the grass stains and faintly fetid odor of the rabbit and the reality of it was like a reassurance. He hid his knife under some winter clothes in his bottom dresser drawer, then went downstairs.

His father was running the water at the sink to get it cold when Wade walked in. Already heat pressed into the kitchen, cramping its space with a hot, humid presence.

"Hey, Dad--"

"Don't sneak around like that," his father said.

"But I wasn't--"

"Hurry up and eat. I want to get down to the yard early this time."

Wade hesitated, then sat down. His mother kissed him lightly on the forehead, filled his plate with scrambled eggs. Chuck was still reading the paper.

"Hey, listen to this. Some kids busted up a guy's greenhouse last night in Woodstock. It's the fourth incident in a week, it says. Night before last somebody over on Elm Street got their car windows smashed-- that's not too far from here."

"Duane Anderson ought to get more men," his mother said. "I told

him that last year. This town is growing too fast for a six-man force."

"Dad," Wade tried again. "Do I have to go to that science thing this summer? Couldn't I stay home?"

"I should say not," his father said, sitting down. He glanced bitterly at paper. "Subsidize the poor and look what you get."

The eggs were getting hard on Wade's plate. He felt a little sick looking at them, and he wished Chuck would stop staring at the paper. It made him think of Redquist.

"But I could learn all that stuff in high school. I don't think--" he struggled to find the right words, "I don't think I need it now."

"Well, you know it all, is that it?"

"No--"

"Why don't you want to go, Wade?" his mother asked.

"Will you hurry up and eat?" Rob said. "I want to get out of here before noon if that's at all possible."

"I'm trying to find out why he doesn't want to go," Kay said.

"Some other time. Besides, I've already paid the fee. It's settled."

"I'll pay you back, Dad."

"How?"

Wade didn't answer. He stirred his eggs. It was no use talking to his father when he was like this. Three weeks until the course started: that was enough time to work on him.

"I'm not going to go," he said flatly.

His father stopped in the act of shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth. His eyes were blazing, but Wade met them, backed stubbornly

by a firm, almost desperate resolve.

"Like hell you aren't," his father said.

"Rob."

His father said nothing, eating again. He did not look at Kay. Wade felt in himself now a conviction to match his father's, even, if he could hold out long enough, to beat him.

"Eat your eggs, Wade," his mother said, and rested her hand lightly on his wrist, but she was looking at Rob, her eyes clouded and unhappy. Wade cut into the drying yellow and white mass on his plate, but it tasted a little like the rabbit had smelled, and he ate the toast instead.

"It says they caught two kids from West Lake breaking into a liquor store," Chuck read.

His father threw his napkin down.

"They all need a damned good hiding."

"Let me see that," Kay said.

Rob shouted from the hallway.

"Come on, you two!"

Kay folded the paper back, a frown creasing the smoothe white of her forehead.

"Rob, pick up some birdseed when you come back. I don't know why I bother---all we get are sparrows and blackbirds anymore. Did you hear those night birds last night?"

Wade looked at her sharply. "What birds?"

"I don't know. They were only there for a little while. They had a very strange cry, kind of like one note over and over."

"Dammit, Wade, come on," his father roared.

Wade swallowed his orange juice in one quick toss of his head.

"Those boys," his mother said, "why do they do it? It's so senseless."

Wade followed Rob and Chuck out to the car. He looked back at the house that suddenly seemed to him vulnerable, even frail.

CHAPTER XVI

When he left the light behind and started across the vacant field, he felt the dark open for him. The sky was crossed with clouds, now hiding the moon, now ringed with an eerie, blue-white filament, the clouds dark in the center and frightening when he looked up at them. It always seemed as if the earth were giving way and the sky expanding in the dark, and he could not look up without finding it hard to breathe and a disturbing fear confuse him.

He trotted slowly along the path worn by countless feet running back and forth to school. Crickets shrilled on either side of him; fluid night shapes seemed to flow into one another far away, while nearby shrubs slipped smoothly past as he ran. He felt the sharp eagerness of returning home.

It was the birds who warned him first.

They were nightbirds, circling suddenly over his head with their wings flashing white spots like eyes on the underside. The birds rushed past him with a faint hissing as they swooped and banked sharply off again until he stopped, and he heard the single, unchanging "kark!" over and over. Behind him there were three more, answering with the same, "kark!" and circling in long, gliding gyres.

Then Wade saw the three boys coming out of the brush where he had been only a moment ago, one of them wearing a white T-shirt. They stopped when they saw him standing alone in the field.

"Get him, Block!" It was Billy shouting.

The three lunged forward. Wade whirled and started running, his heart beating fast with excitement, and he settled into a steady pace that kept him ahead of the three but still in sight. They passed the school and started across the wide, moonlit field toward the highway and railroad bridge beyond. Wade cut at an angle for the bridge and saw the three boys turn to head him off, but the ground they were covering was thick with heavy mud, slowing them down enough for Wade to get over the railroad embankment and up the steep hill flanking its far side.

A quick glance back showed him the last boy straggling badly and the other two falling back as they disappeared down the embankment and pulled their way out again. Wade could not help wondering where Redquist was and why the three seemed so anxious to follow him, as if they, too, knew the way and were not chasing but driving him. But he pushed the thought out of his head.

The moon showed him the barbed wire fence ahead, and he aimed for the section he knew was lower, jumping it cleanly. He rode on the rhythmic drive of his legs, carried effortlessly over shrubs and small, dry ravines that loomed in his path, gliding on while the ravine far ahead caught the moonlight and waited.

Only one followed him now, the white T-shirt bobbing in the light like some disembodied spirit. It stopped at the fence and crawled slowly through. Wade plunged into a small copse of trees, avoided another fence by leaping a dry creek bed, and reappeared on the other side. The moon was partially veiled by clouds, and in the darkness he had to go slower until the light reappeared fully again.

His body was running with a light sweat, slick and cool on his forehead and face. He slowed and started up the crest of the last hill, looking back. The T-shirt was very far away, almost indistinguishable, but it kept coming.

He stopped at the hilltop, never still, snorting and shaking his head to keep the mosquitoes away, pacing the ridge softly while he watched the T-shirt coming slowly after him. He felt excited and jumpy inside, scared and happy in a strange way, and he couldn't stand still.

It wasn't until he turned toward the ravine that he saw Redquist and another boy appear to one side of the ravine. He glanced back at the field behind him. The third boy was still far away. Redquist was running toward him now, his white hair like a flag in the moonlight; the other boy following like a darker shadow.

Wade knew he could not outrun them now and instead lunged toward them, gaining speed on the incline and aiming straight for Redquist. At the last moment he dodged Redquist and struck head down into the boy behind him, butting his head into the flat, soft stomach.

The shock of contact drove an explosive, painful grunt from the boy and flung Wade to one side. Almost as he touched the ground he was on his feet and running toward the ravine, but Redquist was too close at his heels, leaped and dragged him down into the deep grass. Wade twisted away and started up again, but Redquist caught his foot and he fell heavily, the other boy on top of him.

In a moment Redquist's friend was there, and Wade could smell them close, the rancid sweat and tobacco and cheap beer. Fists flung out at him thudded dully against his face and ribs, but he didn't feel them,

fighting back with teeth, feet, striking until the other two didn't know who they hit or if they hit anything at all.

"Goddamn," Jerry panted, "hold...hold--"

"You hold him--Christ! That was me!"

"Who the hell--"

The moon had vanished completely and thick darkness settled over the three. Wade twisted from under Redquist, leaped on the other boy, beating at his face, the breath sobbing in his lungs, his body as though it were wrapped in fire. Now their weight crushed them down, but he fought still; the energy burned in him untouched by their hands, burned with an intense, concentrated force too deep to be fear or desperation, blazing up with the joy of release as if a long and difficult control was finally slipped.

He kicked out blindly and felt his foot strike something that collapsed in like an empty sack. A cry broke out above him, and one of the hard weights was gone; there was a long sob of breath and then a gagging sound.

A sharp pain flooded through his groin, and he swung up, smashing his fist against Redquist's mouth, feeling the knuckle split open. One of his eyes was bruised badly, a dozen places where his clothes were ripped and his ribs battered and his whole mouth felt numb. But he kept fighting, trying to reach the ravine.

Redquist was panting beside him; a sharp cry jerked out of Wade as the older boy's heel cracked against his knee. He felt Redquist's heavy belt buckle rake across his cheek as he squirmed out from under him, then grappling, wrestling, rolling over and over until suddenly the

ground gave way beneath them and they fell into the ravine.

The shock of landing broke them apart, and Wade whipped to his hands and knees, searching the blackness for Jerry. The dark was so complete that it confused him. He didn't know where they were in the ravine or where they had fallen from.

He could hear Redquist breathing harshly somewhere nearby, the sound stopping as he swallowed, then beginning again in the strained silence. Wade crawled into the deep grass, working to one side of the other boy, keeping his face turned to the harsh, sobbing breath in the darkness. Then he stopped, leaning his forehead against the ground. Jerry moved and backed into a thicket's sharp branches. Wade heard him swear softly.

"Can't see--this Goddamn. Duke!" The hoarse whisper was swallowed up. Jerry moved again, striking a tree. Wade heard a brief thrashing of leaves and then,

"Duke!" Redquist calling the boy who had been with him.

There was no answer. Wade lay still, trying to pinpoint Redquist in the darkness. He could not even see where the top of the ravine was, closed in by a thick canopy of leaves and shadows, interlaced above and around them like an impenetrable screen. It seemed as if they had fallen into another world.

He heard a crash of branches somewhere to his right, then a rapid snap of twigs. "Damn it!" Jerry's voice was rising in fear, lost in the center of the ravine.

He thrashed his way out of the clinging bushes; Wade heard him over to the left, now, striking out blindly, his panting more like an

hysterical sob. It sounded as if he had a stick and was swinging it back and forth to batter his way out of the suffocating, terrible darkness, only finding more bushes, an endless maze of trails.

Wade stood up unsteadily. There was something wrong with one of his hands, it wouldn't close all the way. He moved slowly forward, guided by the sound of Redquist stamping through another tangle of brush, closing in on him with a single, relentless intent.

He heard a sudden twist ahead as Jerry whirled in his direction. The moon had come out and they could see each other dimly. Wade was aware of something rushing at him, then a powerful blow knocked him down, and the blind thrashing sounded very far away, finally stopped. He heard feet running and then silence.

Wade rolled over on his stomach and pushed himself up. He had to pull and claw his way out of the ravine and lie on top before attempting the hill. It was still in the back of his mind that Jerry was somewhere ahead of him, and he kept searching the pale, empty hillside until he reached the crest and thumped down on his hands and knees, eyes shut tightly, seeing flashing points of light that seared his eyes. His left knee hurt like hell, and one eye was swollen nearly shut, the cheekbone already lost beneath puffy flesh. Everytime he breathed it seemed a rib leaped and stabbed his lungs.

It wasn't until he looked down that he saw what was wrong with his hand. He was gripping the knife.

He stared at it in the wavering light, then looked around him at the darkness, subtle, shifting, and it seemed that the air, every blade of grass, the ravine behind him was filled with a palpable and virulent

evil, something so devastating that he could only pant with fear, feeling his heart shrink up, cold, useless. His home, his father, daylight, Jeffers--all of it too far, too little, useless.

He vomited tearingly on his empty stomach, then lay back and cried helplessly as the moon washed over his face, turned up to the night sky.

The sobs exhausted him, and soon he lay still, wiping the tears off his face. He was so tired it was an effort to breathe. Something whispered lightly in the grass, and the slow, cool wind over his body was like a benediction.

CHAPTER XVII

Fever set in and he was sick for a long time.

He remembered very little about coming back home. His mother had been waiting for him; he had heard her shocked outcry, remembered his father's angry, frightened face and Chuck standing, still half-asleep and confused behind him.

They had called the doctor, and he had examined Wade in the boy's bed, poking at him until he cried out. He had a cracked rib, two cuts requiring stitches, a bad bruise around his eye, two teeth knocked out, and so many scratches and abrasions the doctor remarked that he looked like a new version of the measles.

"Those night birds," his mother said above him. "They woke me up, and I looked into his room. He was gone. I thought--I didn't know-- I called Rob. It was the birds, crying like that. I couldn't stand hearing them--and then Wade came in--"

The doctor had said he would be up within a week, but the fever refused to go down, flushing his skin with an unhealthy red. His mother called the doctor three more times.

"It's exhaustion, mainly," he had said. "Nervous exhaustion. Has he been under any strain lately?"

"There was a horse he wanted and it was killed, and then he's been working so hard at school," his mother said, "and his father--"

"Does he sleep at night?"

"No. Not much."

"Give him these," he had handed her a bottle of small green pills. "See that he gets rest and quiet. I guess it would be better to keep him here than move him to a hospital. Call me if there's any change for the worse. He's young and strong, Mother, so don't worry too much about him."

Wade had been afraid that his mother would look at him as if he were some kind of wild animal. After the first shock, she seemed glad to wait on him, but every now and then he thought he saw her watching him with a strange fear as if she were afraid that he would get up and leave in the middle of the night. The thought caused him a great anguish, and he kept thinking to himself over and over that it was changed, it was all changed.

His mother told him later that Rob had called the sheriff and judge, shouting about law and order and putting a stop to this kind of hooliganism. Only Wade didn't care about what happened then, and for the first week saw and heard very little of what went on.

He had terrible dreams than made him cry out so much his mother or father had to sit in his room half the night.

At first he was always running in the dark with something after him, something white that bobbed up and down. No matter how fast he ran or where he tried to hide, the white shape came after, slowly, inexorably, wearing him down until he had no strength left and terror swept over him. Sometimes there seemed to be a person who wanted to help, but they kept handing him a knife.

The knife cut deeply into his dreams, and he wanted to know where it was and was angry when no one could find it.

Then he was riding the stallion, but seemed perched too high above the horse's back and when he looked down its head was a skeleton, and the neck a skeleton, the flesh eaten back toward him. He tried to get off, then found himself on the ground, the gigantic body bearing down on him, its hooves cutting the air near his head. Harris was running very slowly across the pasture, shouting at him to get up, only as Wade watched it grew dark and Harris became a white blur, then a single spot growing larger, and he was alone with it in the empty field.

His father came in and told him Redquist had been arrested and charged with stealing from a liquor store. Wade had stared past him vaguely, losing the sense of Rob's words before he had stopped speaking, trying to remember what Redquist had to do with his father. Rob's eyes as they looked down at him were suddenly naked with fear.

"What's wrong with him?" he heard his father ask Kay.

"It's a lot of things. You haven't exactly helped--"

"I haven't? What have I done--"

He dreamed of going into the shed at Harris's and finding on the floor the tiny skeleton of a bird. He could not understand the terror it struck into him.

He dreamed of it again, this time at the ravine. Ralph had brought a newspaper with him and gave it to Wade. When he opened it there was the same tiny skeleton, claws curled inward and the wings long, spidery bones. He struck out at Ralph, only his arm went around the boy's neck and they were laughing at something they had seen. Then he told Ralph to go look for the knife, that he had left it somewhere between the ravine and home. But the boy came back and told him it wasn't there.

He sat in Wade's desk chair, opening and shutting a book, and said that Alvina was going to marry Pat the Fourth of July. Wade thought that was strange, because it was only October, but he looked out his window and saw that the trees were heavy and green.

He told his mother about the dream, and she sat on his bed, smiling gently.

"But Ralph was here, Wade. You kept telling him to go look for some kind of knife you had lost."

"Oh." He turned away from her to stare out his open door as if expecting Ralph to be there.

"Do you want to see him again?"

"What?"

"Would you like to see Ralph again?"

"Oh, I don't know."

He was walking down a dusty, red road, lined with tall oak trees and there was a cemetery back among them. He wanted to go see it, but for some reason there was something he had to do first. When he turned a corner in the road there were no trees, only an endless, wheat-colored plain and the road cutting through the middle like a wound.

He started to walk down it, thirsty and hot, so tired he could hardly move one foot after the other. A horse and rider came toward him, and he stopped to watch them pass. The sun was directly overhead and the rider's face was in shadow, but his hand holding the reins was long and fine, burned brown by the sun. The horse stopped, watching him with its wicked black eyes.

"Where are you going?" Wade asked.

The man didn't answer. He was off the horse and holding the reins over the saddle, his hand both an invitation and a question. The horse stood quiet, tense, ears pricked toward the distance. The boy was afraid. He looked down at his hands and they were long and fine, burned by the sun. The rider was on the horse now, reins still lifted in a question and in that question an offer of all that Wade would ever want to know, all that he would ever ask. But the boy hung back, still afraid of the darkness in the rider's face.

"Where are you going?" he asked again.

The horse moved off, stepping out firmly. Then it seemed that he was following and then he was not, and the whole fabric of the dream trembled, broke, ran together like a watercolor and he was awake.

It was night, and his father was sitting in the desk chair, reading a magazine by the dim light. It was raining softly outside. He felt light-headed and cool, and he stared at his father's angular, tired face until he fell asleep again. The nightmares came less often, finally stopped altogether.

He gained strength slowly. His mother seemed a little sad that she could not do everything for him now, but Wade had never liked to be waited on for very long or kept in bed. He lay back quietly at first, letting his body heal itself, not thinking much about things; then as he grew stronger, he would get restless and the pictures in his head would start going.

He was sitting up for the first time one afternoon when his father came in and sat down beside him on the bed. For a moment he didn't say anything, picking up one of the books on Wade's desk, leafing through

it idly, then snapping it shut. His hands seemed unsure of themselves.

Finally he turned to look at Wade, making no effort to hide the pain and relief the boy saw there. He put one rough hand on Wade's thin arm.

"I've been talking to your mother quite a bit while you were sick. I guess we've both taken a beating in the last few weeks."

He stopped, looking down at the floor as if struggling with himself. He met Wade's eyes squarely. "She said. Wade, if...if I've hurt you--I didn't--"

The boy felt himself crushed to his father and his own arms around his father's shoulders. Wade cried, washing out the madness and fear, felt it leave him weak but calm. His father released him and wiped his own face, taking out his handkerchief and blowing his nose. He gave another to Wade.

"I'd like to know about the fight," Rob said. "If you can tell me."

Wade related the whole story beginning with the camp he and Ralph had made. When he finished, his father rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"All right. I won't ask you about the rest of it. As I remember I snuck out myself once or twice."

"Dad, did you hear the birds? The ones Mom was talking about that night."

"No. I think she just imagined them."

Alvina came to see him when he was strong enough to talk for awhile. She was dressed in a glowing pink suit with shoes to match, bright green beads draped around her neck and green earrings. Wade

thought she looked very pretty. Ralph was with her, but he spent most of the time listening as his mother talked.

"It was Redquist? I knew that bum would end up doing something like this. They oughta lock him up so good they'll forget who he is. That bum. Beating up kids--a bully like that is a menace to all of us, I say. Wade, you hurry up and get outa that bed. I'll cook you the damndest tenderloin special you ever ate in your life, all the trimmings. Say, did you hear Pat and I are getting married? I know he's a truck bum like the rest of them, but I dunno, I got a soft spot for those guys, I guess. You get well, hear me? What a shiner that is! I hope you gave Redquist a good licking. I'd have left him something to remember. Damn, look what time it is! I gotta run, Wade. You come to the wedding, you hear? Ralph is going to be ring bearer." She smiled, blushing slightly. "Yeah, we're going to do it up real nice. Oh, Ralph, I told you to get a haircut. Anyway, if this kid is going to hold the ring, I want somebody there to make damn sure he don't forget it. You get well, hear me?"

Ralph stayed behind for a moment, and Wade showed him the tape on his cracked rib and the long, ugly red bruise around it.

"Say, Wade, I tried to find the knife, but it wasn't anywhere. I looked all over."

"That's okay," he said. "Just so nobody else has it."

"How many where there?"

"Five, but I only fought Redquist and that other guy."

"Gosh, how come I miss out on everything?"

But it bothered him about the knife. He didn't like to think of

it lying in the grass or by the railroad bridge, buried, maybe, but there, waiting. It seemed it would always be waiting.

Alvina left and Wade sank back on the pillow. She wore him out. His mother came in with a lunch tray. He stared dreamily at the open door where Alvina had disappeared and smiled to himself, thinking of her and other things, of what had happened over the past months.

"Alvina is a cow," he murmured, half asleep.

"What?" his mother asked.

Wade didn't answer.

CHAPTER XVIII

Getting well was even more interesting than getting sick.

Wade found that he had to get used to his body all over again. When he scratched his nose, it didn't feel like his nose exactly but as if there were something between his hand and the skin. His leg muscles were sore in places they had never been before. Everything felt different, almost new, his desk, the cool metal of his lamp, books, even the sheets, and food seemed to taste sharper in his mouth. He couldn't get enough of looking at things, and he hoped he would never forget to see, to remember.

And yet after awhile even the reawakening of his senses dulled, and it seemed as if a fog slipped over his mind. Wade felt something inside him had been wounded and had not healed, leaving in its place a sense of apathy. His mother, Chuck, people would talk to him, but it was unreal as if a partition had been placed between them and he would listen to the voice recede, the gestures more like the stiff, jerky movements of characatures. He tried to fight that slow recession into lethargy, but soon it would be too strong and he would feel himself remote from their world. He could not get back.

His father told him that Issac Harris had died of a heart attack a week ago. His farm had been put up for auction to pay legal fees he still owed. Berkley bought his dairy cattle for twenty dollars a head.

"They'll be selling Berkley's land on the block pretty soon," Rob said.

He took Wade for short drives when he had something to deliver to a customer, but they tired the boy at first, and he didn't go out again for nearly a week.

The science session had to start without him, but he didn't mind.

At last he was strong enough to go with his father to the lumber yard where the man had a feed sample to pick up and deliver to one of the outlying farms. The yard was crowded with trucks and construction workers. Rob was using the money from his land to tear down the feed store and enlarge the warehouse.

"After this year, no more damned hog mash and chicken grits," he said to Wade. "From now on they'll just be good, clean timber. That brother of yours had better hurry up with that insecticide he's working on. Tom!" he shouted to Andrews who was talking to three workers. "Tell them to tear the whole front down. I decided to work from the ground up. I'll be back in about an hour."

Andrews waved in acknowledgement, and Wade and his father drove off.

The day was cool for early July, dry and clear with the Canadian air pushing down from the north. Clouds drifted slowly across the northwest sky, in no hurry to be where they were going. Wade watched the countryside move quickly past them, changing from broad highways and housing projects to narrow country roads and miles of uncultivated land, most of it with signs sticking out of the grass, "Sold" or "For Sale".

His father swung into a tree-shaded dirt land with the name "Swenson Farms" on the crossbar above them. They parked by Swenson's barn where the shade covered the car.

"You want to come in?" he asked Wade.

"Is it all right if I stay out here and kind of rest for awhile?"

"All right. I'll only be a minute."

Wade leaned his head on the car window sill and listened to a cardinal whistling above him in one of the trees. Swenson's farm was crossed with white fences, even the barn and house were white. Beef cattle grazed along the far hills, looking like red stones in the sun. Locusts started to whine shrilly, the sound grating like a file across glass, then slowing to a series of loud clicks.

It was getting cramped and a little warm in the car, and Wade got out, wandering over to the barn. He watched his feet kick up tiny insects in the grass, and he smelled the sharp, pungent odor of cattle and horses. He heard someone talking quietly behind the barn, then the squeak of leather.

When Wade came around the corner he saw a training corral, and in the center a young man was saddling an Appaloosa gelding. The horse looked about three years old. Wade hooked his arms over the top railing.

"Is it okay if I watch?"

"Sure." The young man grinned and pointed at Wade's still bruised eye. "You walk into a door?"

"No," he said.

"You're Rob Hazard's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Wade."

"Thought I saw his car drive up. I'm Ted Rosenthal. Ho there, baby," he said as he saddled the horse.

Ted's face was lined by the sun, and it had bleached his hair a

dust blond. His boots were shiny in spots from use, and his clothes, well cared for, had been worn enough that they fit themselves to his tall, wiry frame.

The Appaloosa looked at Wade, rolling his eyes as the cinch tightened around his girth. The eyes were more human-like than in other horses, the white showing at the corners. The horse had a light, spattered patch on his rump, and the rest of him got progressively darker until his head was nearly coal black.

"Easy, Tonka, easy. Mr. Swenson wants to make a cutter out of this one. You ever seen a cutting horse work out?"

"No, sir. What do they do?"

"Say you've got a steer that's hurt or sick and you want him out of the herd. Well, a man on foot is taking his chances. But you get a cutting horse and just haze him into the herd, show him which one you want cut out, and he does all the rest. You just hang on."

"Is this one learning?"

"You watch, and I'll show you after I loosen him up a bit."

The horse snorted, started to move toward Wade when Ted swung up and checked him.

"He's a friendly cuss. Come on, Tonka, get your mind on business."

He rode the gelding in slow figure eights, telling Wade to watch for the change in leads that made the horse, at the crossing point of the eight, look like he was skipping slightly. Ted moved easily with the colt, keeping him well collected, using his legs to tell the horse when to turn. Finally he brought the Appaloosa to a sliding halt.

"Right now I'm teaching him to shift his balance real fast. Watch."

He rode the Appaloosa to the center of the ring, then began tapping the horse's belly lightly on either side. The gelding's head went down, his whole body seemed to sink lower to the ground, and he shifted from side to side like a cat, the movements very quick and light. Ted held onto the saddle horn, not interferring with the horse's head or center of gravity but welding himself to it. They seemed one solid piece, the control between them creating out of themselves a third and more perfect form. Wade thought of the stallion, overpowering, dominant. Here it was different, each ruled by the discipline of a job.

Ted pulled up on the reins, and they were still, separate again.

"Foot work, just like a boxer or football player. You got to have it or all them cattle'll run right over you. Here, you want to try it?"

Wade slipped under the fence and approached the horse slowly, waiting until Ted had dismounted. The Appaloosa's wide forehead and nervous ears gave his face a look of intelligence and curiosity. He buried his soft, whiskery muzzle in the boy's hand, licking it once, then nibbling at his fingers. Wade slipped his hand under the sparse mane, feeling the hot, slippery life in the taut muscle running from poll to withers. It was a good horse, a sensitive, well-bred horse.

Ted gave the boy a leg up, then adjusted the stirrups to fit Wade's legs. The boy shifted in the hard leather saddle, feeling uncomfortable where the stirrups hit his ankles, and the skirts of the saddle bit into his knees as he gripped. The horse felt as though it would slide out from under him. It seemed strange to look down on the neat ridge of mane along the neck and see the slender, forked ears twist back and forth: he hadn't thought he would ever get on a horse again

after the stallion. Ted handed him the reins and told him to take up the slack.

"Otherwise he don't know half of you is there. Make him take the bit. Voice ain't going to stop 900 pounds of horseflesh once it gets going."

Ted stood in the center of the corral while Wade kicked the horse forward, losing his nervousness in the gentle rhythm of the gelding's stride, the lazy, nodding head. He could feel the horse playing with the bit, and he shook the reins to get his attention.

It was so different from the stallion. The Appaloosa did not have the same drive and will, he had to be helped, guided, the rider lending his knowledge and skill to the horse's power.

Wade turned him into the center of the ring, feeling with pleasure the movement of his body and the horse as one. A light pull on the reins brought them beside Ted.

"Now you want him to move from side to side, so you let him know by touching a spot right back of the cinch. Now your heel comes a little higher, so he may get confused at first. Just keep kicking him and he'll get the idea. Let the reins loose. Hold onto the horn if you have to. Just keep your weight with the horse, okay?"

He backed away as Wade let the reins hang and started tapping the horse's sides with his heels. For a moment the Appaloosa tossed his head back, dancing uncertainly, then Wade felt him understand and the black head went down, the whole body became taut and quick, shifting from one side to the other until Wade felt his seat go out from under him and the stirrups bang his ankles painfully. It was like riding a

great cat. Even holding onto the horn didn't help, and before he landed in the dust, Wade pulled up on the reins and stopped the horse.

Ted laughed, slapping the Appaloosa on the neck. It nuzzled his pocket expectantly, and Ted slipped it a piece of dried carrot.

"You get the idea, Wade. How does it feel?"

"How do you stay on when he really gets going?"

"It takes a lot of practice. Well, it's about time to quit. I don't like working a horse more than twenty minutes or so. They don't get tired of it then."

Wade slipped off and walked with Ted back to the barn where the horse was unsaddled and brushed down.

"You want to be a trainer yourself someday?" Ted asked.

"I don't know." He could feel the familiar dullness start to settle over his mind, and he fought it, concentrating on what Ted was doing. The horse had stirred up the old longing again, and it felt as though the secret wound inside him had been touched until it began to hurt. The pain reassured him that he had not died inside.

"You know, I don't mind working for Swenson, but I sure would like my own place somewhere. Get me some land, about sixty acres, and raise top quarter horses. It'd be good business."

Ted brushed the tail, holding it straight out from the Appaloosa's hindquarters.

The horse reached out at Wade. There was a docility in his eyes that made him think of a dog. He seemed not to know of the other, darker world where the stallion, and even for awhile Tribute, had seemed to live. Maybe he would never know. Maybe there wasn't another horse like the

stallion.

The barn behind them was cool and dark. Wade looked into it where the other horses were stabled, their eyes glinting in the dimness like smooth, polished stones, but stones without any fire.

He closed his eyes, leaning against the fence behind him. He still felt the horse between his knees, the fluid power rocking him forward, always the stallion like a potent, fantastic image in the background; to live without surrendering, without turning away from that.

The Appaloosa shoved his nose under Wade's arm. Ted picked up the horse's hooves one by one, checking them. Watch out for his left hind leg: sometimes he kicks. The words faded in his mind.

His father and Paul Swenson came back to the barn, looking for him. Swenson was a short, stocky man with gray eyes nearly lost in tiny folds of flesh when he smiled. He was getting bald and wore his hat indoors and out to hide it. He grinned at Wade's black eye.

"Your dad ought to teach you boxing," he said.

"He does all right," Rob answered.

Swenson ran his hand over the tight black and white rump of the Appaloosa. The horse was nibbling at Wade's shirt, trying to get his attention.

"How'd he go today, Ted?"

Ted looked up from the last hoof.

"Fine. Wade, here, gave him a try. He'd make a top hand someday; handles himself real well."

"How about it, Wade?" Swenson said, smiling. "You want a job here?"

"He's getting through school first," his father said, but the

bantering tone in his voice sounded a little strained. "He can think about horses then."

"Ah, boys think about horses all the time," Swenson said. "Isn't that right, Wade?"

Wade looked up at the three of them ringing the Appaloosa and himself, and suddenly he felt tired and a little sick. He squinted up at Swenson.

"I guess so."

In the car riding home Wade felt the wind strong and cool on his face as he leaned slightly out the window. Its violent rushing drowned out his father's voice; he was telling Wade what Swenson had said about the beef market. Government price supports dropping. Foreign beef imported and American dumped. Taxes. Land going.

The wind slashed through his hair, pulling it tight, straight back from his forehead. His hand curled as though clutching something. Deep inside he felt the stallion, a blindness inherent in his fury and savage strength, like Earl Harris's eyes. Should the rider's hand fail...he could not name it nor give it form, the horror of a force, self-generated, wounding the earth and the earth like an embittered widow closing its wounds, trembling at the stamp of a hoof. There would be nothing to save him, to save any of them.

That's what God is for, he thought.

Tears whipped to his eyes by the wind made him squint to see at all. The landscape blurred, became strange to him, became all the strange landscapes he would ever know until they coalesced into the right one, fitting around him like the fabric of a dream. And the horseman,

that vision he would need when there was nothing to teach him what he would have to know, when time would try and make him forget, renounce; he would have to keep that image between himself and the vague, sly threat of his heart's corruption.